

## ソードアート・オンライン 2

アインクラッド

クリアするまで脱出不可能のデスバトルMMO『ソードアート・オンライン』に接続した主人公・キリト。最上階層を目指す《攻略組》の彼以外にも、様々な職業や考え方を持つプレイヤーがそこには存在していた。

彼女たちはログアウト不可能という苛<sup>か</sup>烈<sup>れつ</sup>な状況下でも、生き生きと暮らし、喜び笑い、そして時には泣いて、ただ《ゲーム》を楽しんでいた。《ビーストテイマー》のシリカ、《鍛冶屋》の女店主・リズベット、謎の少女・ユイ、そして黒い剣士が忘れることの出来ない少女・サチ――。

ソロプレイヤー・キリトが彼女たちと交わした、四つのエピソードを、今紐解く。



か-16-4



ソードアート・オンライン 2  
アインクラッド

川原 礫

電撃文庫

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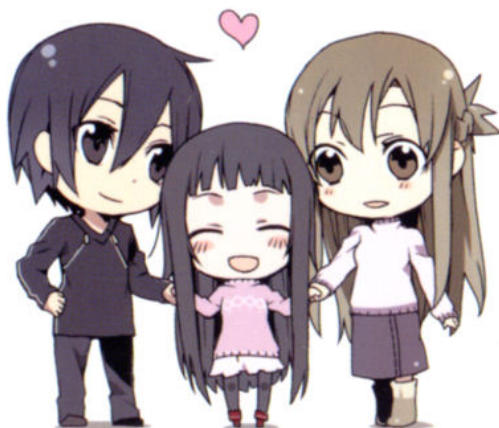
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かわはら れき  
**川原 礫**

先日ついにソロ居酒屋を強行しました。なんだかウーロン茶が人生の味しました。レベルが上がったので次は…ソロ回転寿司に…うわあ無理だー っていうかこの経験値稼ぎ寂しいです。誰か 誰かあそんで

【電撃文庫作品】

アクセル・ワールド1—黒雪姫の帰還—

アクセル・ワールド2—紅の暴風姫—

ソードアート・オンライン1アインクラッド

ソードアート・オンライン2アインクラッド

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あべっし!



002

REKI KAWAHARA ABEC BEE-PEE

# SWORD ART ONLINE

Aincrad



[.....No..... Thank you .....for coming  
to help....]

**Scilica** A «beast tamer» girl possessing the  
familiar monster «Feathery Dragon».



[.....I'm sorry. I couldn't  
save your friend.....]

**Kirito** A «Solo Player» swordsman aiming to  
reach Aincrad's topmost level.



「Idiot!! Don't come out yet!!」

「Err, the dragon's attack pattern is a left right claw, and an ice blast, and a sudden gust attack! .....Be careful, okay?」

—Lizabeth

A girl running the blacksmith shop at Aincrad's 48th floor main district, «Lindaas Street».



"WAH~ PAPA, CARRY ME~"

YUI



A MYSTERIOUS GIRL FOUND COLLAPSED  
IN AICRAD'S 22 FLOOR'S FOREST



「Hey, Kirito. -Let's go  
run away somewhere. 」

—**Sachi** A member in the guild «Black Cats  
of the Full Moon» in Aincrad.



Gargantuan  
Game Castle

## Aincrad

An iron-and-stone made castle consisting of 100 floors. Inside it are numerous cities, small towns and villages, forests, grasslands, and lakes. One stairway connects each floor to the previous and succeeding floor, and all of them are in dangerous labyrinth zones where monsters wander about. Players in this world rely on one weapon as they run past them, find the way to the upper floors, and take down strong guardian monsters, single-mindedly aiming for the top of the castle. Aside from battling with monsters, there are many scopes of play from manufacturing like smithing, leathercraft and sewing, to hunting and cuisine, to music. This is not merely adventuring in a vast field, «Life» is literally possible here.

«Aincrad» is the world set as the stage for «Sword Art Online», declared as the world's first in the VRMMO game genre.

# Prologue

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A huge castle made of stone and steel floating in an endless sky.

That was all this world was.

It took a vagarious group of craftsmen one month to survey the place; the diameter of the base floor was about 10 kilometers — large enough to fit the entirety of Setagaya-ku within. Above, there were 100 floors stacking straight upwards; its sheer size was unbelievable. It was impossible to even guess how much data it consisted of.

Inside, there were a couple of large cities along with countless small scale towns and villages, forests and plains, and even lakes. Only one stairway linked each floor to another, and the stairways existed in dungeons where large numbers of monsters roamed; so discovering and getting through was no easy matter. However, once someone made a breakthrough and arrived at a city of the upper floor, the «Teleport Gates» there and of every city in the lower floors would be connected making it possible for anyone to move freely through these levels.

With these conditions, the huge castle had been steadily conquered for a long time.

The name of the castle was «Aincrad», a world of battles with swords that continued floating and had engulfed approximately six thousand people. Otherwise known as...

«Sword Art Online»

## The Black Swordsman (Aincrad 35th Floor, February 2024)

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"Please.....Don't leave me alone.....Pina....."

Two lines of tears streamed down Silica's cheeks, as scattered grains of light burst from the big feather on the ground.

That pale blue feather was the remains of her sole friend and partner for a long time, the familiar «Pina». Just a few minutes ago, Pina died protecting Silica. Given a mortal wound by the monster's weapon, it gave out a cry in a sad voice before shattering like ice. Leaving only its long tail feather which had always waved happily whenever its name was called——

## Part 1

Silica was one of the rare «Beast Tamers» in SAO, or perhaps it was more accurate to say 'was once'. Her familiar, the symbol of a beast tamer, was no longer here.

A beast tamer wasn't a class or skill given by the system, but a term used by the players.

On rare occasions, aggressive monsters would show interest in players. If you didn't miss the chance, you could successfully tame the monster by giving it something to eat. The monster would then become the player's «Familiar» and serve as a valuable ally who supports the player in various ways. Players referred to those who had succeeded in doing so as beast tamers with a mix of praise and envy.

Of course, not all monsters can become familiars; only a very limited variety of small monsters could. The conditions to trigger the event weren't all that clear, but the only one that everyone was sure about was that the event wouldn't occur if the player killed too many of the monster type.

This was a rather hard condition when you think about it. Even if one tried to get a familiar by repeatedly meeting them, the monsters were aggressive and the player can't avoid entering a fight with them. In other words, if one wished to become a beast tamer, they would have to keep meeting with the monster, and if the event didn't occur they would have to keep running away. It wasn't hard to imagine just how annoying all that would be.

You could say that Silica was very lucky on this matter.

With no knowledge of this, she had entered some forest without any reason on a floor she visited just because she felt like it. The first monster she had met didn't attack her, but merely approached her. She then gave it a peanut that she had bought the day before without much thought, and it just happened to be a food that the monster liked.

The monster was a «Feathery Dragon». Its whole body was covered in soft, pale blue feathers, and it had two long feathers instead of a tail. The small dragon was a very rare monster to come across. Perhaps Silica had been the first to succeed in taming it, as it immediately became the subject of much interest when she went back to her hometown «Friben» on the eighth floor with it sitting on her shoulder. The next day, countless players

had attempted to tame a Feathery Dragon after listening to Silica's information, but none of them managed to succeed.

Silica had named the small dragon «Pina». It was the same name that she gave to a cat she had in the real world.

Familiar monsters were known to have low stats when it comes to actual combat and Pina was no different. But they had a number of special skills instead: a scanning ability that warned the player of approaching monsters, a skill that healed the player a little, and so on. They were all pretty useful and made day-to-day hunting much easier. But what Silica was most happy about was the warmth and comfort that Pina's very existence brought.

The AI of a familiar wasn't that great. Of course, it couldn't talk, and it could only understand a couple dozen commands. But to Silica, who had entered the game when she was only twelve and was being crushed by fear and nervousness, Pina was a savior that was hard to explain with words. It wasn't an exaggeration to say that Silica's «Adventure» — which meant actually «Living» here — had started with Pina.

After a year, Silica and Pina had leveled up smoothly and her skill as a dagger user had become quite good. It made her rather famous amongst the middle level players as one of their best.

Of course, she was still a far cry from the top class warriors who fought on the front lines; but in some ways, those few hundred players who were set on clearing the game amongst the seven thousand total players were harder to see than beast tamers. Therefore, becoming famous among the average players was pretty much the same as becoming one of the idols in the game.

Because female players were rather rare, especially given her age, it didn't take long for «Dragon Master Silica» to become a famous player with numerous fans. She received endless invitations from parties and guilds who wanted an idol player and it was unavoidable for the thirteen year old Silica to become overproud of herself. But in the end, that pride caused her to commit a grave mistake, and she couldn't turn back no matter how much she regretted it.

A fight over a minor detail started everything.

Silica was in a vast forest on the north of the thirty-fifth floor, known as «The Forest of Wandering», with a party that she had met two weeks back.

At that point, the front line was already far away on the fifty-fifth floor, so the thirty-fifth floor had already been cleared. But the top class warriors didn't care about anything except clearing the labyrinth area, so sub-dungeons like «The Forest of Wandering» was a popular target for the average player.

Since the six-player party that Silica had joined was made of skilled warriors, they had fought since morning and found quite a lot of items, including a number of treasure chests. But when the sun began to set and everyone was running out of healing potions, they started to make their way back to the living area. A slim female player who wielded a spear then said something, perhaps in order to keep Silica in check.

"We'll be handing around the items after we get back. But since your lizard heals you, you won't be needing the healing crystals right?"

Silica felt offended and struck back.

"You don't even come out to the front and only hang around the back of the group, so you don't use crystals anyway."

After that, the bickering had intensified, and the attempts of the team leader, a sword-and-shield wielder, to stop it had been totally ignored. In the end, Silica said in anger:

"I don't need the items. I'll never party with you again. There're plenty of people who want to party with me anyway!"

Ignoring the leader's suggestion to at least stay with the party until they were out of the forest and back in the living area, she left the group and walked aimlessly down a small track.

Even if she were solo, she had already mastered seventy percent of her dagger skill and also had Pina to back her up, so the monsters on the thirty-fifth floor weren't a problem for her. She would have been able to get through the forest and back to the living area without any problems. That is, if she hadn't gotten lost.

The forest wasn't called «The Forest of Wandering» for nothing.

The huge forest was full of large, towering trees and was divided into areas like a chess board; one minute after you set foot into an area, it would be randomly linked via warp to a whole new set of areas. If you wanted to get out of the forest, you had to either get through each area within a minute

each, or buy an expensive map from a shop in the living area, which checked the areas your location is currently linked to as you made your way through the forest.

But the only person with a map was the leader. Since using a teleport crystal within The Forest of Wandering only teleported you to another area in the forest instead of back to the city, Silica had to attempt getting through each area. But running around the enormous tree roots and following the ever-meandering forest trail proved harder than she had thought.

Silica had decided to keep going north, but the minute mark kept passing just before she could reach the end of the area, and she ended up being warped to some random area again and again. Soon she was nearing the point of collapsing from the fatigue. The red light of the setting sun deepened and she felt increasingly anxious as the skies darkened and her chances of leaving the dungeon grew more unlikely.

Eventually, Silica gave up on running and began to walk, hoping that she would end up at an area at the edge of the forest by chance. But luck wasn't on her side, and numerous monsters attacked her as she stumbled on. Even with her huge level advantage, as the day grew darker she couldn't even see what was on the ground very well. Although she had Pina to help her, she wasn't able to get out of every fight unscathed and eventually used up not only her remaining potions but also her emergency healing crystals.

As if it sensed Silica's nervousness, Pina stroked her cheek with its head as it purred on her shoulder. Silica regretted her rashness and pride that had gotten her into this situation while she stroked her partner's long neck in a comforting manner.

She muttered in her mind as she walked:

"I'm sorry. I won't think that I'm special again. So please let me get out of this forest the next time I warp."

She stepped into another distorted warp zone as she prayed. After a brief wave of dizziness, what appeared in front of her was the same deep forest she had seen every other time. There wasn't even a hint of the plains in the darkness past all the tall trees.

As the disappointed Silica began to walk again, Pina quickly raised its head and gave a sharp cry. It was a warning. Silica immediately drew her dagger and raised it towards the direction that Pina had been looking at.

A few seconds later, a low growl could be heard behind a huge, moss-covered tree. As Silica focused her gaze, a yellow cursor appeared. There were a few of them. Two, no... three. The monsters' name was «Drunk Ape». They were one of the strongest monsters in The Forest of Wandering. Silica bit her lip.

Even if that were the case—

They weren't all that dangerous if one looked at only the level.

When middle class players, such as Silica, went out onto the field, it was common sense to be several levels higher than the monsters that appear. Normally, they needed to be on a high enough level to defeat five monsters without any healing items on your own.

The reason was that, unlike the top class warriors on the frontlines, the middle class players went on adventures to earn enough col to get by, to gain just enough experience to stay with the average level range, and lastly to simply relieve boredom. Among these reasons, not one was worth risking your life for. In fact, there were still about a thousand players in the «Starting City» who refused to raise the chances of dying by even a little.

But one needed a regular source of income to eat and sleep. Furthermore, all MMORPG players had this disease-like quirk which made them feel insecure if they weren't at least on an average level. Because of this, after about a year and a half since the game started, the main body of players now journeyed onto the field with a huge level advantage to enjoy adventuring in this world.

Therefore, the Drunk Apes, which boasted of being one of the strongest monsters on the thirty-fifth floor, weren't really a challenge for Silica; at least that was how it should have been.

Silica raised her dagger as she forced her mind to concentrate. Pina also floated upwards as it prepared for battle.

The monsters that appeared from behind the tree were anthropoids covered with dark red fur. They held a crude club in the right hand and some sort of gourd with a string tied around it in their left hand.

As the apes raised their clubs and bared their teeth to roar, Silica rushed towards the one in front to make the first strike. She got a clean hit in and took off quite a chunk of its HP with «Rapid Bite», a middle class charge-type dagger skill, and then went into one of the high speed combos that was one of the greatest advantages of wielding a dagger.

The Drunk Apes used low-level mace skills, and although each hit had formidable power, they lacked in speed and multi-hitting combos. Silica rained blows down on the Drunk Ape and then backed away quickly only to charge in again to start a new assault. After doing this several times, the HP of the Drunk Ape had greatly decreased within a short moment. Once in a while, Pina also used its bubble-like breath attack to confuse the opponent.

But just before she was about to launch her fourth skill «Fad Edge» and kill the first ape...

A new opponent came from behind it, switching with the first ape during the brief respite. Silica didn't have any choice but to switch her target and start attacking the second Ape. The first then backed away and tilted the gourd with its left hand—

Silica was shocked as she glanced at the HP bar of the first Drunk Ape. The HP bar was being filled back up at an amazing speed. It seemed as if the gourd held some sort of healing liquid.

She had faced Drunk Apes in the past on the thirty-fifth floor, but there were only two of them that time, and she eliminated both before they had a chance to switch, so she wasn't aware of this special skill. Silica gritted her teeth and concentrated on taking care of the second one properly.

But just as she knocked its HP bar into the red zone and widened the distance between them to start her last attack, the other ape switched with it. It was the third Drunk Ape. At that point the first one had almost completely filled its HP bar.

There would be no end to this if it continued on. Her mouth became dry with anxiety.

Silica had barely any experience fighting solo in the first place. Even if she had an overwhelming advantage in level, it was only a number; the player's actual skill was entirely another matter. The anxiety that had appeared in Silica's mind began to change into confusion. She started to miss more, which opened the room for her enemy to counterattack.

When she managed to lower the third Drunk Ape's HP to about half, her attempt to keep performing combos caused her to overreach. The ape didn't miss that opportunity and counterattacked, which landed a critical blow.

The wooden club was crudely made, but the basic damage from its weight combined with the Drunken Ape's strength stat caused Silica's HP to go down by almost thirty percent. A chill ran down her spine.

The fact that she had run out of healing potions added to her nervousness. Pina's breath restored about ten percent of her HP, but it wasn't something Pina could use very often. Even with that, if she were hit three more times by such an attack — she would die.

Death. Silica froze as soon as that possibility flashed through her mind. Her arm wouldn't go up. Her legs wouldn't move.

Up till now, fighting had been thrilling, but it had been far from actual danger. She had never thought that it was linked to actual «Death» before—

As she stood frozen in front of the Drunk Ape who roared and raised its club again, Silica realized for the first time what fighting with monsters in SAO actually meant. It was a contradiction; SAO was a game, but at the same time it wasn't something to be played.

With the dull sound of a club rushing through the air, it struck her as she continued to stand rigidly. She couldn't take the impact and collapsed onto the ground. Her HP greatly decreased and entered the orange area.

She could no longer think of anything. She could run away. She could use a teleport crystal. There were still other choices she could make, but she simply looked at the club as the ape raised it a third time.

The crude weapon gave off a red glow, and just when she was about to close her eyes reflexively—

A small figure jumped into the space between her and the club. A heavy and chilling sound of impact sounded. The sky-blue feathers scattered in an instant as the small HP bar dropped down to zero.

Pina gazed at Silica with its round, blue eyes after it fell to the floor. It gave a weak growl and then scattered into countless polygons. A long tail feather floated down as if it were dancing.

Something inside Silica snapped. The thread that held her together had disappeared. Before the sadness could come, she felt anger: anger at herself for being unable to move after being hit just once; and before that, anger at herself for being conceited enough to attempt going through the forest alone just because she felt annoyed about a minor quarrel.

Silica stepped back with a lithe movement, avoiding the blow that the monster had swung at her. She then rushed in with a shout. The dagger in her right hand flashed as it rained blows down on the Ape.

She didn't even try to dodge the club of the Ape that had switched in after it saw the HP of its companion decrease, but instead blocked it with her left hand. Her HP decreased, although not by as much as a direct hit. But she ignored it and went after the third ape, the one that had killed Pina.

She used her small stature to her advantage, charged straight at the Ape, and dug her dagger into its chest with all her strength. With a flashy critical hit effect, the enemy's HP was reduced to nothing. A scream came first, and then the sound of shattering.

Within the scattering debris, Silica turned her body and charged at a new target. Her HP bar had already gone into the red danger area, but she didn't even care anymore. She saw only the enemy she had to kill, as if it were enlarged to fill her vision.

She forgot even her fear of death and was just about to attempt a doomed charge below the swinging club.

A pure white light slashed across the two Drunk Apes from behind them as they stood side by side.

The bodies of the two Apes were each split into two in an instant; then they shattered and disappeared.

As Silica stood numbly, she saw a male player just past the haze of scattering fragments. He had black hair and wore a black coat. He wasn't all that tall, but an overwhelming presence radiated from him. Silica stepped back as she felt an instinctive fear. Their eyes met.

But his eyes were silent and as deep as the darkness. The boy sheathed his one-handed sword back into the scabbard on his back with a clank and then opened his mouth.

"I'm sorry. I couldn't save your friend"

Strength left her body as soon as she heard this. She couldn't stop the tears running down her cheeks. She didn't even register her dagger slipping out of her hand and falling onto the ground. As soon as she saw the sky-blue feather on the ground, she fell to her knees in front of it.

As her anger disappeared, an uncontrollable sadness and loss rushed out. They formed in the shape of tears and rolled down her cheeks relentlessly.

Familiars weren't programmed to stop an attack as part of its normal behavior. Pina had rushed in front of the attack of its own free will — it could be called the result of its love towards Silica, whom it had spent a year with.

As Silica clutched herself, she muttered while crying.

"Please... don't leave me alone... Pina..."

But the sky-blue feather didn't give any sort of reply.

## Part 2

"...I'm sorry."

The boy clad in black clothing said again. Silica shook her head and tried desperately to stop her tears.

"...No... I was... being stupid... Thank you...for saving me..."

She managed to force just that out as she stopped herself from crying.

The boy walked over to her slowly and knelt down in front of Silica before asking hesitantly.

"...That feather, does it have an item name by any chance?"

Surprised by the unexpected question, Silica raised her head. She wiped her tears and then turned her gaze over to the feather.

Now that she thought about it, it was strange that only the feather had remained. Be it monster or human, beings of this world usually left nothing behind after they died, not even their equipment. Silica hesitantly reached over with her hand and clicked on the surface of the feather with her right index finger. The half-transparent window that appeared showed its name and weight.

«Pina's Heart»

Just as Silica was about to start crying again after seeing this, the boy stopped her.

"Wa-Wait-Wait. If a heart item is left behind, then you can revive it."

"What!?"

Silica raised her head sharply. She stared at the boy's face with her mouth half open.

"It's something that was discovered not too long ago, so there are still lots of people who don't know. There's a dungeon in the northern region of the forty-seventh floor called «The Hill of Memories». It's quite hard despite its name... but they say that the flower that blooms on the top of it is a familiar revival ite—."

"Re-Really!?"

Silica shot up and shouted before the boy had finished talking. It felt as if hope had flooded her chest, which had been filled with sorrow. But—

"...The forty-seventh floor..."

She muttered and sagged her shoulders. It was twelve floors above this level, floor thirty-five. It was definitely not a safe area for her.

Just when she turned her disheartened eyes to the floor.

"Hmm—"

The boy in front of her said in a bothered voice.

"I could go get it for you if you give me the expenses and some pay, but they say that the flower only shows up if the beast tamer who lost their familiar goes..."

Silica smiled at the surprisingly kind swordsman and spoke:

"No... I'm happy with the information you gave me. If I work hard to raise my level, someday I'll be able to..."

"Well the reason you can't do that is, they say that you can only revive the familiar within four days after it was killed. After that, the item's name will change from «Heart» to «Remains»..."

"What...!"

Silica couldn't stop herself from shouting.

Her level was forty-four right now. If SAO were a normal RPG, the floor of the dungeon would be the suited difficulty for a player with the same level. But since it became a crazy death-game, the safe area would be about ten levels below the player's.

In other words, to explore the forty-seventh floor, she would need to reach level fifty-five at the very least. But no matter how she thought about it, it was impossible to gain over ten levels in just three days... no, two days if she took away the time she needed to clear the dungeon. She had just managed to get to where she is now by diligently going on adventures.

Silica dropped her head as despair took over her once again. She picked Pina's feather up from the ground and hugged it gently to her chest. Tears appeared as she resented her stupidity and powerlessness.

She noticed the boy stand up. She thought he was leaving and that she should at least say goodbye, but she didn't have the energy to open her mouth any more—

But suddenly, a half-transparent system window appeared in front of her. It was a trade window. When she raised her head, she saw the boy manipulating another window. Items began to appear one by one in the trade section. «Silver Thread Armor», «Ebon Dagger»... They were all equipments that she had never even seen before.

"Errm..."

When she opened her mouth hesitantly, the boy explained casually:

"These should cover for about five, six levels. If I go with you I suppose it'll be fine."

"What...?"

Silica stood up with her mouth slightly open. She couldn't tell what the boy was thinking, so she looked directly into his face. But because of the SAO system, all she could see was his HP bar; she couldn't even figure out his name or level.

It was hard to tell how old he was. His equipment was entirely black. The force and calmness that radiated from him made it seem like he was several years older than her, but the eyes that were covered by his long bangs appeared somewhat innocent, and the feminine facial lines gave him a slightly girlish look. Silica asked carefully:

"Why... are you being so kind...?"

To tell the truth, she was more wary than anything else.

Up till now, a couple of male players who had been much older than her had tried to gain her love; she had even received a proposal once. To Silica, who was only thirteen, these experiences brought her nothing but fear. She had never received even a confession in the real world.

Inevitably, Silica had started to avoid male players that seemed to have those sorts of interests. Besides, «there's always a motive behind sweet words» was common sense in Aincrad.

The boy scratched his head again, as if he were short on answers. He opened his mouth to say something, but then closed it once again. After that, he turned his gaze and then muttered in a small voice:

"...Well, it's not like this is a manga... I'll tell you if you promise not to laugh."

"I won't."

"It's because... you look like my sister."

At this really manga-like answer, Silica couldn't stop herself from laughing. She blocked her mouth with her hand, but she couldn't stop the laughter that was bubbling up.

"You, you said you wouldn't laugh..."

The boy had a hurt expression on his face and sagged his shoulders as he went into a sulk. That made her laugh even harder.



—He's not a bad person...

As she laughed, Silica decided to trust the kindness of this boy. She had already resolved herself to die once. If it were for saving Pina, there was no reason for her to hold back.

Silica bowed and said:

"I hope we get along. You saved me, and even offered to do something like this for me..."

She stared at the trade window and then put in all the Col she had. There were more than ten pieces of equipment that the boy had offered, and all of them looked like rare items that you couldn't buy from shops.

"Well... I suppose this is too little, but..."

"No, you don't have to pay. They were spares anyway and this coincides with the reason I came here..."

While he talked about something that she couldn't understand, the boy pressed the OK button without receiving any money.

"Thank you. Really.... Oh, I'm Silica."

As she said her name, she half-expected the boy to be surprised by it, but it seemed like he didn't know it. She felt put out for a second, but then she remembered that it was this side of her that made her end up like this in the first place.

The boy nodded slightly and offered his right hand.

"I'm Kirito. I hope we get along."

They shook hands.

The player called Kirito took out a map of the Wandering Forest from the pouch that hung from his belt. He looked for an area that was linked to the entrance and then started walking. As she followed, she put Pina's feather against her lips and muttered in her mind.

Just wait, Pina. I'll revive you soon...

The living area of the thirty-fifth floor had a pastoral, farm-like feel with its white buildings and red roofs. The village itself wasn't all that big, but it was

the main adventuring area for the middle level players right now, so there were quite a few people walking around.

Silica's hometown was Friben Village, which was situated on the eighth floor; but since she hadn't bought a house, staying at any inn in any village wasn't really all that different. The most important thing was how the food served there tasted. Silica liked the cheesecake that the NPC cook here made, so she had been staying here since two weeks ago when she began adventuring in the Forest of Wandering.

As she lead Kirito, who was looking around as if everything fascinated him, a couple of players whose faces she knew began to strike up a conversation with her. They were trying to get Silica to join their party after hearing the rumor that she had left her old one.

"Erm, well... thank you for the offer, but..."

She bowed as she refused the offers in order to not make them feel bad. She then glanced at Kirito, who was standing beside her, and continued:

"...I'm going to party with this person for a while..."

What!? Really!? The people who surrounded Silica said sullenly and stared at Kirito suspiciously.

Silica had seen a bit of Kirito's skill; but when you looked at the black swordsman just standing there, he didn't seem all that strong.

He didn't have any expensive equipment on—he didn't wear any armor and only had an old and worn-looking long coat on top of his shirt—all he had was a single simple one-handed sword; he didn't even have a shield.

"Hey, you—"

The tall two-handed sword user who had tried the hardest to get Silica to join walked over to Kirito. He opened his mouth as he looked down upon Kirito:

"You're a new face, but you shouldn't cut in line. We've had our eyes on Silica for quite a while now."

"Well I didn't know; things just ended up like this somehow..."

Kirito scratched his head with a troubled expression.

He could at least argue a little, Silica thought with a little discontent, and then she spoke to the two-handed sword wielder:

"Erm, it's something I requested. I'm sorry!"

Silica bowed low one last time and then walked away as she pulled at the end of Kirito's coat.

"I'll send you a message next time~."

Silica walked quickly, wanting to get away from the waving crowd, which still wouldn't completely give up on her, as fast as possible. She cut across the gate plaza and into the main street.

When they finally couldn't see the players anymore, Silica sighed and looked up at Kirito.

"...I-I'm sorry. For making you go through all this trouble."

"It's fine."

Kirito answered with a slight smile as if it didn't worry him at all.

"Silica-san is pretty popular."

"Please just call me Silica... It's not because I'm popular; they're just trying to get me in their party as a sort of mascot, really. But... I thought that I was special... and went into the forest by myself... and ended up..."

Tears began to appear naturally as she thought of Pina.

"It's alright."

Kirito said in a calm voice.

"We'll definitely bring Pina back, so don't worry about it."

Silica wiped her tears and smiled at Kirito. Strangely enough, it felt like she could trust the words of this person.

Finally, they could see a two-story building to their right. It was the inn that Silica used often: «Weathercock Tavern». Now that they had arrived, Silica realized that she had led Kirito here without saying anything.

"Ah, where's your home, Kirito-san?"

"Oh, it's on the fiftieth floor.... But it's too much of a bother going there now, so I suppose I'll just stay here for the night."

"Ah, okay!"

Silica was excited for some reason and clapped her hands together.

"The cheesecake here is really good."

She was just about to lead Kirito into the inn by pulling at his coat when four players came out of the shop next to them. They were the party members whom she had hunted with for the past two weeks. The male players that appeared first didn't see Silica and simply headed for the plaza, but the female player at the end looked back and Silica met her gaze reflexively.

"...!"

It was the face that she didn't want to see the most right now. It was the spear wielder that had been the cause of the fight which had made Silica quit the party. She was going to just walk into the inn with her head bowed low but...

"Oh, isn't it Silica?"

The spear wielder called out, so Silica didn't have a choice but to stop walking.

"...Yeah."

"Ho~, you somehow managed to get out of the forest. That's a relief."

The player named Rosalia, who had her deep red hair in wild curls, said with a lopsided smile.

"But you're too late. We've already distributed the items."

"I said I don't need them! —I'm busy right now so goodbye!"

Silica tried to end the conversation, but it seemed that the other side didn't have any intention of letting her go just yet.

"Oh? What happened to that lizard?"

Silica bit her lip. You couldn't put familiars in your inventory or entrust it to another person. In other words, there was only one reason why it wasn't

there. Rosalia most probably knew that too, but she continued on with a slight smile.

"Oh, by any chance...?"

"It's dead.... But!"

Silica glared at the spear wielder.

"I'm going to revive Pina!"

Rosalia, who had been smiling with great satisfaction, widened her eyes. She even gave a low whistle.

"Ho, so you're going to the «Hill of Memories»? But can you get through it at your level?"

"She can."

Kirito declared even before Silica could answer. He hid Silica behind his coat as if to protect her.

"It's not that hard of a dungeon anyway."

Rosalia looked up and down at Kirito with a blunt stare and then scoffed:

"You're another one that fell for her? You don't look all that strong."

Silica started shaking with fury. She looked downwards as she tried to hold her tears back.

"Let's go."

Kirito placed a hand on her shoulder, and then Silica began to walk towards the inn.

"Well, good luck."

Rosalia's laughing voice sounded behind her, but she didn't look back.

The first floor of «Weathercock Tavern» was a huge restaurant. Kirito got Silica to sit down at a table and then walked over to the front counter where a NPC was waiting. After he finished checking in, he clicked the menu on the counter and then quickly returned.

As soon as Kirito sat down on the other side, Silica opened her mouth to apologize for making Kirito go through such an uncomfortable situation because of her. But Kirito stopped her by raising his hand and then smiled.

"Let's eat first."

The waiter brought two steaming mugs over just in time. The cups in front of them were filled with a red liquid; a mysterious aroma rose from them.

"To the forming of our party."

They clinked their mugs together at Kirito's toast. Silica then took a sip of the hot liquid.

"...Tasty..."

The smell and sour-sweet taste was similar to the wine that her father had let her try a long time ago. But Silica already had a go at every drink offered in this restaurant over the past two weeks, yet she couldn't remember trying this one.

"Erm, what is this...?"

Kirito smiled before he answered:

"You can bring bottled drinks with you to NPC restaurants. This is an item that I had called «Ruby Ichor». If you drink a cup of it, it will increase your dexterity by one point."

"It's-It's really precious...!"

"Well, it's not like alcohol gets any better if I keep it in my inventory, and I don't know that many people so I don't have many chances to drink it..."

Kirito gave a silly shrug. Silica laughed and then took another sip. The somehow nostalgic taste slowly softened her heart, which had hardened because of the many sad things that had happened this day.

After she finished drinking, Silica held the cup to her chest as if she still longed for its warmth. She then turned her gaze downwards to the table and said quietly:

"...Why... do they say such mean things..."

Kirito's expression turned serious as he put his cup down and then opened his mouth.

"Is SAO your first MMORPG?"

"It's my first."

"Oh right— In any online game, there're many players whose personalities change when they wear the mask of their character. There are people who become kind, as well as others who become evil... They called it roleplaying in the past, but I think it's different in SAO."

Kirito's gaze sharpened.

"Even though we're in such a difficult situation... Well, it's impossible for all the players to work together at clearing the game. But there are too many people who enjoy watching others suffer, stealing items— and even those who kill others."

Kirito looked straight at Silica. There seemed to be a deep sadness behind his anger.

"I think that the people who commit crimes here are total garbage back in the real world as well."

He almost spat this out. But then he noticed that Silica was cowering slightly, so he smiled and apologized:

"Sorry... I'm not even in the position to talk about others myself. I hardly ever help others. I even— caused my companions to die..."

"Kirito-san..."

Silica realized that the black swordsman sitting in front of her bore a deep scar within him. She wanted to console him, but she resented the fact that words were too shallow to convey what she wanted to say. Instead, she unconsciously grasped Kirito's hand, which was clenched on top of the table, with both of her hands.

"Kirito-san is a good person. You saved me."

At first, Kirito was surprised and tried to pull his hand back, but he soon relaxed. A soft smile appeared on his lips.

"...It seems I ended up being comforted. Thanks, Silica."

Just then, Silica felt a painful feeling, as if her heart had constricted. Her heartbeat sped up for no reason. Her face felt hot.

She pulled her hands away quickly and pressed them down on her chest. But the aching didn't stop.

"What are you doing...?"

As Kirito leaned forward over the table, Silica shook her head and managed to smile.

"It-It's nothing! Ah, I'm hungry!"

After they had eaten their bread and stew, with some cheesecake for dessert, it was already past eight. They decided to turn in early in preparation for going to the forty-seventh floor tomorrow. The two went upstairs to the second floor, where there were countless rooms on either side of the wide corridor.

The room that Kirito had rented was, by coincidence, next to Silica's. They bid each other good night with a smile.

As soon as she entered her room, Silica decided that before she got changed, she would practice some combos to familiarize herself with the new dagger that Kirito had given her. She tried to concentrate on the weapon, which was slightly heavier than the one she was used to, but the aching in her chest made it hard to.

After she somehow managed to chain five blows together, she opened her window, unequipped her gear, and then got into bed in her underwear. She then tapped on the wall to bring out the pop-up menu and switched off the lights.

She felt a heavy weariness all over her body, so she thought that she would be able to fall asleep easily. But for some reason, she felt even less drowsy than usual.

Ever since they had become friends, she had always gone to sleep with Pina's soft body in her arms, so the wide bed felt somewhat empty. She tossed and turned for a bit before she gave up on sleeping and sat back up. She kept looking towards her left— where the wall that was connected to Kirito's room stood.

She wanted to talk some more with him.

She was surprised at herself as she thought of this. This person was a male player whom she had known for less than a day. She had avoided

male players up until now, but why did this swordsman she knew nothing about keep appearing in her mind?

She couldn't explain her own feelings. When she glanced at the clock, which was at the bottom of her vision, it was already ten. She could no longer hear the footsteps of other players from her window, only the sound of a dog barking in the distance.

'Well that doesn't make any sense, so let's just sleep.'

She thought that in her mind. But for some reason, she got out of bed and stepped lightly onto the floor. After telling herself that she would only knock and wave her hand, she opened the menu, chose the cutest tunic she had, and put it on.

She took a few steps in the candlelit corridor. Then, after hesitating for a few dozen seconds in front of the door, she knocked twice.

Normally, all doors should shield sounds off, preventing the voices in conversation from leaking out. However, that restriction was lifted only after knocks, for thirty seconds, and Kirito immediately called out a reply, and opened the door.

Kirito, in a simple shirt with his weapons unequipped, looked at Silica and spoke while giving a slight stare of wonder.

"Huh? Is something the matter?"

"Well—"

Silica just realized that she hadn't prepared a reasonable excuse for coming and was flustered. 'I just wanted to talk' simply sounded too childish.

"Well, that err— Ah, I wanted to know more about the forty-seventh floor!"

Fortunately, Kirito didn't suspect anything and simply nodded.

"Okay then. Should we head downstairs?"

"No, well— If it's alright, in your room..."

She answered without thinking and then quickly added:

"Be-Because, we shouldn't let anyone else hear precious information!"

"Erm... well... yeah, you're right. But..."

Kirito scratched his head with a slightly uncomfortable expression, then...

"Well, I suppose it should be okay."

He muttered, then opened the door properly and took a step back.

Of course, Kirito's room was the same as her own: a bed on the left, plus a tea table and a chair a bit further in. That was all the furniture there. A lantern mounted on the left wall let out an orange glow.

Kirito offered the chair before he sat down on the bed and opened a window. He manipulated it quickly and called out a small box.

The box that had been placed on the table had a small crystal ball inside. It shone under the light of the lantern.

"Pretty... What is it?"

"It's an item called the «Mirage Sphere»."

When Kirito clicked on the sphere, a menu window appeared. He manipulated it quickly and pressed the OK button.

As soon as he did this, the sphere began to project a bright blue light, and a large spherical hologram appeared. The image seemed to be the entirety of a floor in Aincrad. It showed the villages and every single tree in great detail, and was completely different from the simple map that could be found on the system menu.

"Uwaa...!"

Silica stared numbly at the half-transparent map. It almost seemed like it could show people walking around if she kept gazing at it.

"This is the living area, and this is the Hill of Memories. You have to go past this way, but... there are some strong monsters around here..."

Kirito pointed here and there as he explained the geography of the forty-seventh floor without pausing. Silica felt warm just by listening to that calm voice.

"And if you cross this bridge you can see the hi..."

Suddenly Kirito stopped talking.

"...?"

"Shh..."

When she raised her head, she saw that Kirito's expression was hard and that he had a finger on his lips. He glared at the door with a sharp gaze.

Kirito burst into action. He jumped off the bed at lightning speed and opened the door.

"Who's there...!?"

Silica could hear the sound of running footsteps. She ran over and looked outside from under Kirito's body, where she saw someone's shadow running down the stairs.

"Wha-What is it!?"

"...I think he was eavesdropping."

"What...? But you can't hear anything past a wall right?"

"You can if your eavesdropping skill is high enough. Although... there aren't... all that many people who would train this skill..."

Kirito closed the door and returned to the room. He sat down on the bed with a pondering expression on his face. Silica sat down next to him and wrapped her arms around herself. She was overwhelmed with an inexplicable feeling of fear.

"Why was the person eavesdropping...?"

"We'll find out soon, probably. I have a message to send, so could you wait a bit?"

Kirito smiled slightly before he put the crystal map away and opened a window. He started moving his fingers on top of the holographic keyboard.

Silica curled up on his bed. A distant memory from the real world came back to her. Her father was a reporter. He was always in front of an old PC, typing something with a serious expression. Silica liked to watch the back of her father as he did that.

She didn't feel afraid anymore. As she watched the side of Kirito's face from behind, it felt as if she were enveloped in a warmth that she had forgotten for so long. Before she knew it, her eyes had closed themselves.



### Part 3

Silica awoke to a chiming noise that was sounding in her ear. It was a morning alarm that only she could hear. The time set was seven in the morning.

She pulled the blanket off herself and sat up. It was usually hard to get up in the mornings, but today she was able to open her eyes in a good mood. Her head felt fresh, as if everything had been washed away by the deep sleep.

After stretching, Silica was just about to get off the bed when she froze.

There was a person sleeping with his back to the bed; the morning sunlight that was shining through the window fell on him. Just as Silica drew a breath to scream, thinking that it was an intruder, she remembered where she had fallen asleep last night.

—I, in Kirito-san's room...

As soon as she realized that fact, her face grew hot as if she had been hit by a fire breath attack. Since emotions were rather overstated in SAO, steam might really be coming off her face right now. It seemed that Kirito left Silica on the bed and slept on the floor. Silica groaned as she covered her face with her hands out of embarrassment and regret.

After taking a few dozen seconds to calm herself down, Silica quietly got off the bed and stood up. She then walked over to Kirito with silent footsteps and stared at his face.

The sleeping face of the black swordsman looked so innocent that Silica couldn't stop herself from smiling. She had thought that he was quite a bit older than her because of his sharp gaze. But surprisingly, now that she saw him like this, he didn't seem all that different from her.

It was fun watching his sleeping face; but Silica couldn't stay like this forever, so she softly prodded the black swordsman's shoulder and spoke to him.

"Kirito-san, it's morning~."

Kirito opened his eyes widely and blinked several times as he stared blankly at Silica's face for a while. Then his expression quickly changed into one of embarrassment.

"Ah... So-Sorry!"

He suddenly lowered his head.

"I thought of waking you up but you were so deep asleep... and I couldn't open the door to your room, so..."

Rooms that players rented were impenetrable system-wise, so there was no way you could get in unless you were a friend of the player. Silica quickly waved her hand and said:

"No, no, I'm the one who's sorry! For taking over your bed... "

"No, it's fine. You don't get any muscle aches here no matter how you sleep."

After standing up, Kirito stretched his neck, which made cracking noises contradictory to what he just said. He then raised his arms and stretched them. He looked at Silica as if he had just thought of something before opening his mouth:

"...Anyway, good morning."

"Go-Good morning."

The two looked at each other and smiled.

It was already bright when they stepped outside after eating a solid meal in preparation for «The Hill of Memories» on the forty-seventh floor. The players who were preparing to start their day and the players that had just returned from their nightly adventures came and went with contrasting expressions.

After replenishing their potion supplies at the shop next to the inn, the two headed for the gate plaza. Luckily, they managed to make it to the teleport gate without running into anyone who wanted Silica in their party like yesterday. Just as she was about to run to the shimmering blue teleport area, Silica stopped.

"Ah... I, don't know the name of the village on the forty-seventh floor..."

She was about to check the map for the name when Kirito offered his right hand.

"It's fine. I'll designate the place."

Silica felt grateful as she took his hand.

"Teleport! Floria!"

As soon as Kirito said this, a blinding light covered both of them.

After the light faded, the feeling of transportation followed and countless colors exploded in Silica's vision.

"Uwa..."

She shouted unconsciously.

The gate plaza of the forty-seventh floor was overflowing with flowers. Two small paths cut across the plaza in a cross shape. Aside from that, the rest of the space was taken up entirely by flower beds, each of them surrounded by red bricks and filled with flowers that she didn't know.

"Amazing..."

"This floor's also called the «Flower Garden», as not only the village but the whole floor is covered with flowers. If we had the time, we could also go to the «Forest of Giant Flowers» to the north..."

"I'll look forward to that some other time."

Silica smiled at Kirito before she crouched in front of a flower bed. She put her face closer to a bluish flower that was similar to a cornflower and sniffed it.

The flower was made with surprisingly high detail: from the veins of the flower, its five petals, the white stamen, and up to the green stem.

Of course not everything in Aincrad, including this flowerbed, as well as all the other plants and buildings, existed in such a detailed form all the time. If they did that, then even SAO's mainframe, however high its performance was, would run into a shortage of system resources.

To avoid that while giving the players a highly detailed environment as close to reality as possible, SAO used the «Digital Focusing System». It was a system that brought out the finer details of an object only when a player showed interest and focused on it.

After she heard of this system, Silica became afraid that showing interest in things would strain the system; but she couldn't hold herself back right now and kept staring at the various flowers.

When she finally managed to stop herself from walking unconsciously while enjoying the fragrance, Silica took a look around.

Most of the people here were couples consisting of a male and a female. All of them were happily conversing with each other, either holding one another's hands or had their arms linked. It seemed that this place had become one of those places. Silica looked up at Kirito, who was thoughtlessly standing next to her.

—Would we look like that as well...?

After thinking this, Silica said loudly to cover up the fact that she was blushing:

"Let-Let's go out to the field quickly!"

"Huh? Ah, yeah."

Kirito stood blinking for a second before he nodded and began walking next to Silica.

They left the gate plaza only to find out that even the main street of the village was covered with flowers. As the two walked next to each other, Silica thought about when she had first met Kirito. She couldn't believe that only a day had passed since then. The swordsman had already become a significant presence in her heart.

She glanced his way and wondered how he felt, but Kirito still had a mysterious feel and it was hard to tell what he was thinking. Silica hesitated for a while before she prepared herself and opened her mouth:

"Erm... Kirito-san. Can I ask about your little sister..."

"Wh-Why all of a sudden?"

"You said that I reminded you of her. So, I was just curious..."

Talking about the real world was one of the greatest taboos in Aincrad. There were a lot of reasons, but the biggest one was that if the thought of 'this world is virtual and therefore fake' embedded itself deep within the players' minds, then they wouldn't be able to accept the «death» in SAO as real.

But she wanted to ask about Kirito's little sister, whom he said was like her. She wanted to know if Kirito wanted something from her as a little sister.

"...We weren't...all that close..."

Kirito started talking.

"I said that she was my little sister, but she's actually my cousin. We've always lived together ever since she was born because of some circumstances, so she shouldn't know that though. Well, maybe it's because of this... but I kept distancing myself from her without really meaning to. I even avoided running into her at home."

A small sigh came from Kirito.

"...On top of that, we had a strict grandfather. He forced me to go to a kendo dojo when I was eight, but I couldn't really get into it and stopped after two years. My grandfather had hit me pretty hard... but when he did that, my sister started crying and protected me by saying that she'll do even my share to make him stop hitting me. After that, I began playing on the computer and lost myself in it, but my sister really devoted herself to kendo and even made it pretty far in the national championships before our grandfather passed away. It was enough to make even him pleased... But I always felt sorry; I always wondered if that was really something she wanted to do and if she resented me. I kept avoiding her because of that... and now we ended up like this."

Kirito stopped talking and glanced down at Silica's face.

"So I might have saved you to satisfy myself, to atone for my past... Sorry."

Silica was an only child so she couldn't completely grasp all of what Kirito said. But for some reason, she felt as if she could understand his little sister.

"...I don't think your little sister resents you, Kirito-san. If she didn't like it, then she wouldn't have been able to work so hard at it. She most probably liked kendo very much."

As Silica said this, choosing her words carefully, Kirito smiled.

"It seems I'm the one who keeps getting comforted... Is it really like that? ...It would be nice if it is."

Silica felt something warm spread in her heart. She was happy that Kirito had opened up to her.

The two soon arrived at the north entrance of the village. Countless white flowers grew from the vines that were coiled around the slim, silver-colored metal arch. The main street passed through it and stretched on to become a highway surrounded by green hills before disappearing into the haze.

"Well... our adventure finally starts."

"Yeah."

Silica pulled herself away from Kirito's arm, steadied her expression, and nodded.

"With your level and equipment, the monsters around here shouldn't be too difficult for you to beat. But..."

As he said this, Kirito rummaged through the pouch hanging on his belt, took out a sky blue crystal, and then placed it in Silica's hand. It was a Teleport Crystal.

"You don't know what's going to happen on the field. So keep this in mind. If something unexpected happens and I tell you to get away, then use that crystal to leave. Any village is fine. You don't have to worry about me."

"Bu-But..."

"Promise me. I've... destroyed a whole party before. I don't want to repeat the same mistake again."

Kirito's expression was so serious that Silica couldn't do anything but nod. After Kirito received her answer he smiled in relief.

"Then, let's go!"

"Okay!"

Silica made sure of the feel of the dagger equipped at her side and resolved in her mind; she at least wouldn't become confused like yesterday and she would fight to the best of her ability.

But—

"Kya-aaaaaah!? What's that—!? It, it looks horrible———!!"

They had met their first monster only a few minutes after they started walking in a northward direction on the fields of the forty-seventh floor.

"U-Uwaa!! Go away——!"

The thing that appeared and was making its way through the bushes had a form that Silica would never have imagined. «A walking flower» would be the best description. The dark green stem was about as thick as a human arm and it stood up using its roots, which was split in numerous places. The stem or body supported a huge yellow flower that was similar to a sunflower. It had its mouth open, with teeth spouting out of it, revealing flashes of the red from the inside.

It had two vines that stretched out from the middle part of the stem, which made one think of the arms an animal had. It seemed that those arms and its mouth were the bodyparts it used for attacking. The man-eating plant ran towards Silica with a smiling mouth while swinging its tentacle-like arms. This thing that looked like a grotesque caricature made Silica feel disgusted.

"I said go away—!"

Silica swung her dagger wildly with her eyes almost closed. Kirito, who stood next to her, said in a disconcerted voice:

"It-It's fine. That monster's really weak. If you aim for the white bit just under the flower, then you can easily..."

"Bu-But it looks horrible——!"

"If that thing looks bad then this is going to be hard. There's also a monster that has numerous flowers, and one that looks like a carnivorous plant, and even one that has lots of sticky tentacles..."

"Kya——!!"

As she screamed at what Kirito said, Silica activated a sword skill; of course, it simply cut through the empty air. During the short delay after that, the two tentacles wrapped themselves around Silica's two legs and lifted her up with surprising strength.

"Uwah!?"



Silica found herself hanging upside down with her vision reversed while her skirt, faithful to the virtual gravity, slid down.

"Uaaa!?"

She quickly pressed down on the end of her skirt and tried to cut the vine. But since she was in an awkward position, it didn't work out very well. Silica shouted with her face red:

"Ki-Kirito-san, help! Don't look, but help!!"

"Tha-That's a bit hard."

With his left hand covering his eyes, Kirito answered with an uncomfortable expression while the huge flower continued to swing Silica to and fro.

"Stop!"

Silica didn't have a choice but to let go of her skirt, grab onto the vine, and cut it. The back of the flower's neck came within reach as she fell and she initiated a sword skill. This time it struck the mark, and as the flower's head fell off, its whole body exploded and vanished. Silica, who landed lightly amidst a rain of polygon debris, asked Kirito as soon as she turned around.

"...Did you see?"

The black swordsman looked down at Silica through the gaps between his fingers and answered:

"...No, I didn't."

They went through five more battles to get used to the monsters before increasing their pace; although she almost fainted when a monster that looked like a sea anemone grabbed her with its sticky tentacles.

Kirito didn't participate much in the battles and mostly just supported Silica, occasionally blocking attacks when Silica was in danger. The party experience is divided according to the amount of damage each party member dealt to the monster. Since she was defeating high-levelled monsters, she also gained experience points several times faster than usual and quickly rose a level.

As they kept following the endless red brick road, a bridge that led over a small stream appeared. Beyond it they could see a large hill, and the path seemed to lead to its top.

"That's the «Hill of Memories»."

"There doesn't appear to be any forks."

"Yeah. We just have to keep going up, so there're no worries about getting lost. But they say that there are lots of monsters. Let's be careful."

"Okay!"

Soon, soon she could revive Pina. When she thought of this, her footsteps hastened naturally.

As they started walking along the uphill path that was full of blooming flowers, they ran into more monsters just like Kirito had predicted. The plant type monsters were also much bigger, but Silica's black dagger was much stronger than she had thought, allowing her to defeat most of them with a single combo.

But Kirito's skill was even more surprising.

She had thought that he was a pretty high-level swordsman after seeing him defeat two drunken apes with a single swing of his sword. But even after coming up twelve floors, he still didn't lose a single bit of his composure. When a large number of monsters appeared, he helped Silica by just taking out all of them except one.

As they continued, Silica couldn't help but wonder what such a high-level player was doing on the thirty-fifth floor.

Based on what he said, it seemed like he had something to do in the «Forest of Wandering». But she had never heard of any rare items or monsters there.

Let's ask him after this adventure is over— Silica thought as she swung her dagger; yet even as she did this, the narrow path began to gradually get steeper. As they defeated the increasingly aggressive monsters and made their way through the densely wooded area—

They arrived at the top of the hill.

"Uwa—!"

Silica held herself back as she ran forward a couple of steps and exclaimed.

Sky garden— this was truly a place that suited its name. The open space surrounded by the dense woods was full of flowers contending against themselves as they bloomed.

"We're finally here."

Kirito said as he walked toward Silica and sheathed his sword.

"The flower... Is it here...?"

"Yeah. There's a stone in the middle and on top of it..."

Silica was already running before Kirito even finished talking. She could definitely see a shining white stone in the middle of the flower beds. She ran towards it, panting, and then carefully examined the top of the rock that came up to about her chest.

"Huh.....?"

But there was nothing there. There was only a small bit grass in the middle of an indent in the rock; there was nothing that one could call a flower.

"It's... It's not here, Kirito-san!"

She shouted at Kirito, who had run up to her side. Tears started to appear in her eyes.

"There's no way... —Ah, look."

Silica followed Kirito's gaze and looked back at the stone. Then—

"Ah..."

A small sprout grew out from amidst the soft grass. As she stared at it, the focus system activated and the young plant became more detailed. Two white leaves opened up like a clam and a stem quickly grew out from in between.

The stem grew tall in the blink of an eye, just like in that video she had seen during a science class ages ago, and then a small bud appeared at the end of it. The small raindrop-shaped bud gave off a pearly white light from within.

As Kirito and Silica watched with bated breath, the end of the bud started to open; then— with a bell-like tinkling, it opened. A little spot of light danced across the air.

The two simply watched the white flower grow without moving an inch. Seven petals reached out like the radiance of a star, and light shined softly from its center, mixing in with that of the sky's.

Silica looked up at Kirito, feeling as if she shouldn't touch this. Kirito gave a soft smile and nodded.

Silica nodded in response and then reached towards the flower with her right hand. The moment she touched it, the stem that was as thin as a thread of silk broke as if it were made of ice, and only the flower was left in her hand. She then touched it gently as she breathed softly. The name window appeared soundlessly. «Pneuma's Flower»—

"Now... we can revive Pina..."

"Yeah. You just have to drip the droplet of water in the flower on the heart item. But there are a lot of strong monsters here, so it would be better to do it after we get back to the village. Let's just wait a bit longer and hurry back."

"Okay!"

Silica nodded and opened her main window before putting the flower in it. She checked that it was in the item inventory before closing the window.

To tell the truth, she wanted to use a teleport crystal to return immediately, but Silica held herself back and started walking. It was virtually a rule never to use the expensive crystal unless one was in real danger.

Fortunately, they didn't run into that many monsters on the way back. They soon reached the stream after coming down at a quick pace.

Now I can meet Pina in about an hour at the most—

She hugged her chest, which felt as if it were going to explode, and was just about to cross the bridge—

Suddenly Kirito grabbed her shoulder. She looked back, her heart beating rapidly, and saw Kirito glaring at the dense group of trees over the bridge with a frightening expression. He then opened his mouth and talked in a low and tense voice:

"—You guys lying in ambush, come out right now."

"What...!?"

Silica quickly looked towards the other side, but she couldn't see anyone. After a few tense seconds passed, the leaves started moving with a rustling sound. Cursors that represented the players appeared. They were green, so they weren't criminals.

Surprisingly — the person who came into view across the short bridge was someone that Silica knew.

Flame red hair, with lips of the same color; the spear warrior wielded a slim, cross-shaped spear and wore black armor that shone like enamel.

"Ro-Rosalia-san...!? Why are you at a place like..."

Rosalia smiled lopsidedly and ignored the question from Silica, whose eyes were wide open with surprise.

"To think that you saw through my hiding; it seems that your scan skill is pretty high, swordsman. Did I underestimate you a little?"

Then she turned towards Silica:

"Looks like you luckily managed to get «Pneuma's Flower». Congratulations, Silica."

Silica, who couldn't figure out Rosalia's true intentions, took a couple of steps back. She felt something inexplicably bad about this.

Rosalia didn't betray her expectations and began speaking a second later:

"Hand over that flower right now."

Silica didn't know what to say.

"...!? What... what are you saying...?"

Then, Kirito, who had been silent until now, stepped forward and opened his mouth:

"I can't let you do that, Rosalia-san. No— I should call you the leader of the orange guild «Titan's Hand»."

Rosalia's eyebrows twitched upwards and the smile disappeared from her face.

In SAO, players who commit acts that are judged as criminals, such as stealing, harming other players, or killing them, have their cursors' color

changed from green to orange. Therefore, people refer to these criminal individuals as orange players and a guild that consist of them as orange guilds. Silica knew about this, but she had never seen them before.

Yet Rosalia's HP cursor, which she could see right in front of her eyes, was green no matter how she looked at it. Silica looked up at Kirito, who was standing next to her, and asked in a dry voice:

"Hey... but... look... Rosalia-san's, it's green..."

"Even in an orange guild, there are plenty of occasions when not all of the members are orange. The green members search out prey and hide amongst their parties before luring them to the ambush point. The person who was eavesdropping on us yesterday must be a member of her group as well."

"Wha-What..."

Silica looked at Rosalia with shock and loathing.

"The—then, the reason she partied with us for the past two weeks was because..."

Rosalia smiled venomously once again and spoke:

"Yeah~ I was checking out how strong the party was, and at the same time was waiting for them to grow fat on the money they earned through their adventuring. In fact, I was going to take care of them today."

She licked her lips as she stared at Silica.

"I was wondering why the person I looked forward to hunting the most suddenly left, and then I heard that you were going to get a rare item. «Pneuma's Flower» is pretty expensive these days. Gathering information is important after all~"

Then she stopped talking for a moment, looked at Kirito, and shrugged.

"But swordsman, you were playing with this kid even though you knew that? Are you some kind of idiot? Or did you really fall for her?"

Silica's face reddened with fury at Rosalia's insults. Her hand moved to draw her dagger. But Kirito grabbed her shoulder.

"No, it's none of those things."

Kirito said, his voice cold.

"I was looking for you as well, Rosalia-san."

"—What do you mean?"

"You attacked the guild «Silver Flag» ten days ago on the thirty-eighth floor, right? The one where four members died and only the leader survived."

"Ah~, those beggars?"

Rosalia didn't even flinch as she nodded.

"That leader... he was looking for somebody to avenge his team in the gate plaza at the front lines, crying from morning till night."

A terrifying coldness could be felt from Kirito's words. It felt like a blade of ice that had been sharpened to cut anything that came near.

"But when I received his request, he didn't ask me to kill you. All he asked me to do was to throw you all into the prison of the Black Iron Castle — could you understand how he felt?"

"Nope."

Rosalia answered as if she couldn't even be bothered.

"What? Why are you acting so serious? Are you stupid? There's no evidence that the person dies in real life if you kill them here anyway. Besides, it's not like this will be a crime when we return to the real world. We don't even know if we can go back, yet here you talk about justice and rules; it's not even funny. I hate guys like you the most — people who dragged some weird logic in with them when they came into this world."

Rosalia's eyes grew angry.

"So, you mean to tell me that you seriously took the words of some guy who couldn't even die properly and were looking for us? You really have nothing to do. Well, I'll acknowledge that I fell for your bait. But... do you really think that you can do anything with just two people...?"

A sadistic smile appeared on her face and she waved her hand twice in the air.

At that moment, the trees on either sides of the path that led straight from the bridge shook violently, and people appeared from between them. Cursors emerged one after another into Silica's vision. Most of them were orange. Their numbers went up to ten. If they had crossed the bridge without spotting the ambush, then they would have been surrounded. There was one other green amongst the orange players— his spiky hairstyle was, without a doubt, the one they saw at the inn last night.

The bandits who just appeared were all male players dressed in gaudy clothes. They all had silver accessories and sub-equipment hanging from all over their bodies.

Silica hid behind Kirito's coat as feelings of revulsion came over her. She whispered quietly:

"Ki-Kirito-san... there are too many. We have to run...!"

"It's fine. Just have your crystal ready until I tell you to get away."

Kirito answered with a calm voice, ruffled Silica's hair, and then walked towards the other side of the bridge. Silica stood there in shock. It was just too reckless. She thought of this and called him:

"Kirito-san...!"

As soon as her voice rang through the field—

"Kirito...?"

One of the bandits muttered. His smile faded and he frowned; his eyes moved from one side to another as if he were trying to remember something.

"Those clothes... the one-handed blade without a shield... «The Black Swordsman»...?"

His face grew pale as he stepped back.

"Thi-This is serious Rosalia-san! That bastard... he's a beater and... a clearer...!"

At his words, the expressions of all the other members hardened with shock. Silica was surprised as well. She just stared at Kirito's back, one which she couldn't call wide, totally taken aback.

She knew that he was quite a high-level player after watching him fight. But she never even dreamed that he was one of the «Clearers», the elite group of top-class players who went into the frontline dungeons, where nobody had even set foot in before, and even defeated bosses. She heard that they concentrated solely on clearing SAO, and it was hard to even see them on the middle floors—

Even Rosalia stood there with her mouth open for a few seconds before she came to her senses and screamed:

"Wh-Why would a clearer be wandering around here!? He probably just called himself that to scare us! What he's wearing is just some cosplay. And— even if he really were «The Black Swordsman», he should be a pushover with this many people!!"

As if their vigor had returned with her remark, the huge axe-wielder who stood at the head of the orange players shouted:

"Ye-Yeah! If he's a clearer then he should have a lot of items and money too right!? This is a really big chance!"

All the bandits agreed and drew their weapons. The numerous bits of metal glinted with heinous light.

"Kirito-san... it's impossible to win, run!!"

Silica shouted desperately with the crystal grasped tightly in her hand. As Rosalia had said, he wouldn't be able to win no matter how strong he is with this many enemies. But Kirito didn't move. He didn't even draw his weapon.

They seemed to have taken this as a form of resignation; the nine players, which didn't include Rosalia and the other green player, all drew their weapons and raced against each other to reach Kirito first. They stomped across the short bridge and then— "Yiaaa!!"

"Dieee!!"

They surrounded Kirito, who had his head bowed down, in a half circle before they all hit him with their weapons. Kirito's body shook violently from the force of nine attacks.

"No—!!"

Silica screamed as she covered her face with her hands.

"No! Stop! Kirito-san's going to, d...die!!"

But they didn't listen.

Some of them laughed manically, while others kept swearing as they continued to attack Kirito as if they were intoxicated by the violence. Rosalia, who stood at the middle of the bridge, couldn't stop her excitement from showing as she stared at the tragedy while licking her finger.

Silica wiped her tears and grasped the handle of her dagger. She knew that she couldn't do anything even if she jumped in, but she couldn't just stand there and watch anymore. Then, just as she was about to take a step towards Kirito— she noticed something and stopped.

Kirito's HP bar wasn't decreasing.

No, it was merely decreasing by a little bit, despite the endless rain of blows. Yet even that was filled back up after a couple of seconds.

The bandits finally noticed that the black swordsman in front of them showed no sign of falling and their expressions became confused.

"What the hell are you guys doing!? Kill him!!"

At Rosalia's anxious order, the blows rained down for a few more seconds. But there was no change in the situation.

"Hey... what's going on...?"

One person made a face as if he had seen something utterly bizarre before he stopped moving and stepped back. His surprise quickly spread to the eight other members, who then stopped attacking and widened the distance between them and Kirito.

Silence fell upon the area, and in the middle of it, Kirito slowly raised his head. A quiet voice sounded:

"—About 400 every 10 seconds? That's the amount of damage you nine dealt to me. I'm on level 78, my HP is 14,500... add that I automatically regain 600 points every 10 seconds with «Battle Healing». The whole lot of you can't defeat me even if you keep hitting me for hours."



The bandits stood there with their mouths wide open, as if they were in shock. Eventually, the two-handed sword user, who seemed to be the sub-leader, said in a dry voice.

"Is... is that even allowed...? It doesn't even make any freaking sense..."

"Yeah."

Kirito spat the words out:

"Just a difference in numbers makes such a ridiculous disparity in strength; that's the unreasonable part of level system MMORPGs!"

The bandits stepped back, as if they were intimidated by Kirito's voice, which seemed to hide something behind it. Their surprised faces were replaced by looks of terror.

"Che."

Rosalia tutted and then drew out a teleport crystal from her hip. She raised it high up into the air and opened her mouth:

"Teleport—"

Even before she could even finish the sentence, the air seemed to vibrate for a split second and Kirito was then standing right in front of her.

"Ack..."

As Rosalia froze for a moment, Kirito took the crystal out of her hands, then grabbed her collar and dragged her back towards the other bandits.

"Le-Let me go!! What are you trying to do you bastard!!!"

Kirito threw her towards the group of bandits, who were standing there dazed, and then started rummaging through his pouch without saying a word. The crystal he took out was also blue. But the color was far deeper than a teleport crystal.

"The person who had asked me to do this bought this corridor crystal with all the money he had. He said that he set the prison area of the Black Iron Castle as the exit. So I'll be teleporting all of you to prison, and «The Army» could cover the rest from there."

Rosalia, who was sitting on the ground, stayed silent for a while before she smiled like it was a bluff.

"—And what if I say I don't want to?"

"Then I will kill every single one of you."

Her smile froze on her face at Kirito's short answer.

"—Is what I want to say... but in that case I'll just use this."

Kirito took out a small dagger from the inside of his coat. One could see a vaguely green liquid on the surface of the blade by examining it carefully.

"Paralysis poison; it's a level five poison, so you guys won't be able to move for about ten minutes. That'll be enough to throw you all into the corridor... Go by yourself, or be thrown in; it's your choice."

Nobody was bluffing now. After seeing all of them bow their heads in silence, Kirito put the knife away, raised the deep blue crystal up high, and then shouted.

"Corridor open!"

The crystal shattered in an instant and a blue whirlpool of light appeared.

"Damn it all..."

The tall axe-wielder walked into the corridor first with his shoulders sagging. The rest of the orange players then disappeared into the light one by one, some quietly, while others swore as they walked in. After the green player that gathered information followed them, the only person left was Rosalia.

The red haired bandit didn't even try to move after all of her comrades disappeared into the corridor. She sat with her legs folded and looked up at Kirito as if challenging him.

"...Well, have a go if you want. If you hurt a green you'll become an orange..."

Kirito grabbed her collar before she even finished talking.

"I'll tell you this: I'm a solo; becoming an orange for a day or two doesn't even mean anything to me."

Kirito spat out coldly before dragging her up and over to the corridor. Rosalia resisted as she flailed her arms and legs about.

"Wait, please, stop! Forgive me! Huh?! ...Ah, right, you, won't you work with me? With your skills we could take down any guild..."

She never finished what she was saying. Kirito threw Rosalia headfirst into the corridor. After she disappeared, the corridor shined brightly for a moment and then vanished.

Everything was calm again.

The spring field that was full of the natural sounds, of chirping birds and running water, became quiet again as if everything that just happened a few moments ago were a lie. But Silica couldn't move. Her surprise about Kirito's true identity, her relief at the disappearance of the bandits, all of these emotions flooded in at once, leaving her unable to even open her mouth.

Kirito tilted his head and silently watched the speechless Silica for a while before he finally said something in almost a whisper:

"...Sorry, Silica. It seems I ended up using you as bait. I considered telling you about this beforehand... but I thought that you would be scared so I didn't."

Silica tried desperately to shake her head, but she couldn't; countless thoughts spun about her mind at the same time and were overwhelming her.

"I'll take you to the village."

Kirito said this and began to walk. Silica somehow managed to force her voice out towards his back.

"My—my legs won't move."

Kirito looked back and offered his right hand with a smile; as Silica grabbed tightly onto his hand she could finally smile.

The two remained mostly silent until they reached the Weathercock Tavern on the thirty-fifth floor. There were lots of things that Silica wanted to say, but she just couldn't talk, as if there were a pebble stuck in her throat.

When they went up to the second floor and entered Kirito's room, the red light of the sunset was already streaming in through the window. Silica

finally managed to speak with a trembling voice to Kirito, who seemed to have become a black silhouette because of the light.

"Kirito-san... are you going to leave...?"

After a long silence, the silhouette nodded slowly.

"Yeah... I've been away from the front lines for five days already. I need to get back to clearing the game as soon as possible..."

"...I suppose you're right..."

To tell the truth, Silica wanted to ask him to take her with him.

But she couldn't.

Kirito's level is 78. Her level is 45. With a level gap of 33—the difference separating them was painfully clear. If she followed Kirito to the front lines, Silica would be cut down in an instant. Even though they were logged into the same game, a wall higher than anything in real life stood between their separate worlds.

"...I...I..."

Silica bit her lip and desperately tried to hold back the emotions that threatened to overflow; two streaks of tears formed from those feelings and rolled down her cheeks.

Suddenly, she felt Kirito place his hands on her shoulders. A low and gentle voice whispered right next to her:

"Levels are just numbers. The strength in this world is nothing more than an illusion. There are things far more important than that. So let's meet again in the real world. If we do, we'll be able to become friends again."

To tell the truth, Silica wanted to lean against the black chest in front of her. But as she felt Kirito's words spread their warmth through her bursting heart, she realized that she shouldn't expect any more from him. She then closed her eyes and muttered:

"Okay. It's—it's a promise."

She detached herself from Kirito, looked up at his face, and was finally able to smile for real. Kirito smiled as well and said:

"So, let's call out Pina."

"Okay!"

Silica nodded and waved her right hand to summon the main window. She scrolled through the item inventory and took out «Pina's Heart».

She put the sky blue feather that popped out of the window on the tea table and then took out «Pneuma's Flower» as well.

With the pearly white flower in her hand, she closed the window and looked up at Kirito.

"All you have to do is to drip the droplet of water that's in the middle of the flower onto the feather. Once you do that Pina'll come back."

"Okay..."

As she stared at the sky blue feather, Silica whispered in her mind.

Pina... I'll tell you lots and lots; about the amazing adventure that I had today... and about the person who saved you, who became my brother for just a day.

With tears in her eyes, Silica tilted the flower in her right hand towards the feather.

(End)

## Warmth of the Heart (Aincrad 48th Floor, June 2024)

The gigantic waterwheel spun steadily, filling the entire shop with a calming sound.

Even though this was just a small house for support-class use amongst the player-exclusive housing, its price rose like the tide because of that waterwheel. When I first found this house in the main district of the 48th floor Lindus, my mind suddenly went 'this is it!', right before its price horrified me.

From that moment on, I began to work like crazy, borrowed money from various sources, and managed to accumulate three million Col within just two months. If this was the real world, my body would be covered in muscles from all the times I had swung my hammer, and my right hand would be full of thick calluses.

But all that paid off, as I acquired the deed just a step ahead of my competitors and opened «Lisbeth's Special Weapon Shop» at this house with the waterwheel. That happened three months ago during the cool Spring.

## Part 1

After quickly drinking my morning coffee — thank god this is Aincrad — while listening to the revolving waterwheel as if its sounds were a BGM, I changed into my blacksmith uniform and glanced at my image in the full length mirror that hung on the wall.

Even though I called it a blacksmith uniform, it wasn't anything even resembling overalls, but actually looked more like a waitress uniform: a dark red top with puffed sleeves and a flared skirt of the same color, plus a pure white apron over that and a red ribbon atop my chest.

I wasn't the one who picked these clothes; it was actually a friend of mine who was also a regular customer. According to her, 'you have a baby face so stiff clothes don't suit you.'

Well that's what she said, and I was like 'mind your own business!' But sales jumped twofold once I started wearing this uniform, so I had no choice but to keep wearing it.

Her advice didn't just stop with my clothes, but even went to my hair; it was now customized to be extremely pink and fluffy. But based on the customer responses, it seemed that this look suited me.

I, blacksmith Lisbeth, was fifteen when I first logged onto SAO. I heard back in the real world that I looked younger than my age, but that became even more pronounced in this world. When my pink hair, large blue eyes, and small lips combined with the old-fashioned apron, my reflection in the mirror felt almost like a doll.

Since I was a middle schooler in the other world with no interest in fashion, the gap grew even wider. Somehow I had gotten used to how I look, but since my personality doesn't change as easily, I had scared some customers with my outbursts from time to time.

I checked if there was anything that I forgot to equip before I went to the front of the shop and flipped the 'CLOSED' sign. I looked at the few players that had been waiting for the shop to open, then showed them my best smile and greeted them.

"Good morning! Welcome!"

Actually, it hadn't been all that long since I was able to do this naturally.

Running a shop had been a longtime dream of mine, but doing so in a game was very different from in the real world. I experienced firsthand how hard reception and service was when I first started as a street vendor with an inn as my base.

Since keeping a smile on was too hard, I decided to win through quality, and it seemed that leveling my weaponsmithing skill like crazy was the answer, as many of my regular customers continued to peruse my weapons even after I opened this shop.

After I finished greeting them, I left the reception to my NPC clerk and holed myself up in the workshop that was attached to the store. There were about ten items that needed to be made to order today.

As soon as I pulled the lever on the wall, the bellows began using the mechanical power from the waterwheel to blow air into the furnace, and the polisher started spinning. I took out an expensive piece of metal from my inventory and stuck it in the furnace, which had begun to heat up. After heating the metal enough, I moved it over to the anvil with a pair of tongs. I knelt on one knee and grasped my hammer, then called up the pop-up menu and chose the item I wanted to make. Now all I had to do was hit the chunk of metal for the designated number of times and the item would be forged. There was no technique required for this and the quality of the resulting weapon was random; but I thought that the end result depended on how much I concentrated, so I tensed all my muscles and slowly raised the hammer. Then, just when I was about to strike the metal—

"Hey, Liz!"

"Ahh!"

The door to the workshop opened loudly and I missed; instead of the metal, I struck the anvil with a pathetic clang and a spray of sparks.

As I raised my head, the intruder was scratching her head and smiling with her tongue stuck out.

"Sorry~ I'll be careful next time."

"I wonder how many times I've heard that— ...Well, at least it was before I started."

I stood up with a sigh and put the piece of metal back into the furnace before placing my hands on my hips and turning around. Then I looked up at the girl who was slightly taller than me.

"...Hey, Asuna."

My friend and regular customer, the rapier-wielder Asuna, crossed the room as she walked towards me and sat down on the wooden stool. She then pushed back the long chestnut-brown hair that went past her shoulders with her hand. All of her movements seemed to shine, as if she was a movie star, and dazed me even though I've known her for ages.

I sat down as well on the chair in front of the anvil and leaned my hammer against the wall.

"...So, what is it today? You're pretty early."

"Ah, I want you to take care of this."

Asuna took off her rapier, with the blade still in its sheath, and then threw it. I caught it with one hand and pulled it out. The rapier was a little dull from the long period of use, but it wasn't bad enough to give the blade any trouble cutting.

"It's not that out of shape is it? It's a bit early for polishing."

"Yeah you're right. But I want it to be all shiny."

"Hmmm?"

I looked at Asuna carefully. Her knight outfit with the red crosses on white and her miniskirt was the same as ever, but her boots shined as if they were new and she even wore a pair of silver earrings.

"You're being strange~ Now that I think about it, it's a weekday today. What about your guild's clearing quota? Didn't you say that you guys were having a hard time with the sixty-third floor?"

After I said this, Asuna gave an embarrassed smile:

"Yeah— I got a vacation today. Because I have a promise with somebody later today..."

"Ohh~!"

I shifted closer towards Asuna while still sitting on my chair.

"Tell me more. Who are you meeting?"

"Se-Secret!"

Asuna blushed and avoided my gaze. I crossed my arms, nodded, and then spoke:

"Ah~ I thought that you were strangely brighter these days. So you finally got yourself a boyfriend."

"It-It's not like that!!"

Asuna's cheeks turned to a deeper red. She coughed and then asked me a question while glancing at me slightly:

"...Am I, really all that different nowadays...?"

"Of course~ When I first met you, you only concentrated on clearing dungeons! I thought you were a little too stiff, but then, starting this spring, you began to change a little; like taking a rest from clearing the game on a weekday — that's something you would never have done back then."

"Ri-Right ...maybe I really have been affected..."

"So, who is it? Someone I know?"

"I... don't think so... most probably."

"Bring him over next time."

"It's really not like that! It's still, well... a one way thing..."

"Hmm...?"

This time I was really surprised. Asuna was the sub-leader of the strongest guild, KoB, and one of the top five best looking girls in Aincrad. There were as many boys who wanted Asuna's attention as there were stars in the sky, but I never even dreamed that the opposite existed.

"Well, y'know, he's a really strange person."

Asuna said with her eyes gazing off into the distance. She had a soft smile on her lips. If this was a romance manga, then there would be flower petals in the background right now.

"Should I say that he's unpredictable, or that he just takes everything at his own pace... yet in spite of all that, he's really strong."

"Oh, stronger than you?"

"Yeah, like really; if we duelled, I wouldn't even last one minute."

"Ohh~ I could count the number of people who can do that with my fingers."

As soon as I began going through the list of clearers in my head, Asuna started waving her arms.

"Ah, don't imagine him~!"

"Well, I'll look forward to seeing him soon. And if that's the case I'll rely on you for advertising as well!"

"You never miss a chance. I'll introduce him —Ah, oh! Polish it quickly!"

"Right, right. I'll get it done right now so just wait a moment."

I stood up with Asuna's rapier in my hand and walked over to the revolving polisher in the corner of the room.

I drew the thin blade from its red sheath. The weapon was categorized as «Rapier» with the unique name «Lambent Light». It was one of the best swords I've ever made. Even if I use the best raw materials, the best hammer, the best anvil, and the best everything, the quality of the weapon still differed due to the random factor. Therefore, I would only be able to make a sword of this quality every three months or so.

I slowly held the sword against the polisher with both hands. There was no technique involved in polishing weapons either, but I had no intention of neglecting it.

I slid the blade across the polisher from the hilt to the tip of the sword. Sparks flew out as a clear, metallic sound rang about, and at the same time a shimmering gleam returned to the blade. When the polishing process finished, the rapier returned to its clear silvery appearance, shining with the light of the morning sun.

I sheathed the blade again and threw it over to Asuna. Then I caught the 100 col silver coin that she tossed over to me at the same time with the tips of my fingers.

"Thanks!"

"I'll ask you to repair my armor later as well... but I'm running out of time now so bye!"

Asuna stood up and hung the rapier to her side on the sword belt.

"I wonder what he's like~ Maybe I should go along."

"Ehh, n-no!"

"Hahaha, I'm joking. But bring him along next time."

"S-Soon."

Asuna waved her hand and ran out of the workshop as if she was running away. I let out a deep sigh and collapsed into my chair again.

"...Must be good."

I smiled somewhat bitterly at the words that popped out of my mouth.

A year and a half had passed since I came to this world. Because of my personality, I didn't dawdle and instead poured everything into making my shop flourish, which had gotten me this far. But now that I had set up a shop and almost completed my smithing skill, I was starting to miss the company of people again, most probably because I didn't have a clear goal anymore.

Since there weren't many girls in Aincrad, quite a few guys have tried to get close to me, but for some reason I never really felt like responding. So when it came to this subject I felt pretty envious of Asuna.

"Will a «Fabulous Meeting» quest come to me as well, I wonder~"

I mumbled, then shook my head to get rid of these strange thoughts and stood up. I took the piece of metal, which was red hot by now, out of the furnace and put it back onto the anvil. I supposed this guy would be my partner for the time being. With these thoughts lingering about, I raised my hammer and struck down. Hiiyaa.

The rhythmic sound of metal resounding through the workshop would usually clear my mind for me, but today the lump in my heart just wouldn't go away.

It was noon of the next day when he visited my shop.

I finished all of the weapon orders yesterday and was nodding off on the rocking chair on the terrace in front of the shop.

I was dreaming. It was a dream about when I was still in elementary school. I was a diligent and quiet kid, but I had this habit of falling asleep during the first afternoon lesson. The teachers often berated me for drifting off.

Back then I looked up to this young male teacher who had just graduated from university. I still felt embarrassed about getting reprimanded, but for some reason I really liked the way he woke me up. He would softly shake my shoulder and say in a low, quiet voice—

"Erm, I'm sorry but..."

"Ye-Yes, I'm sorry!"

"Wha?!"

I shouted and jumped up like a spring. In front of me stood a male player with a surprised expression fixed onto his face.

"Huh...?"

I looked around at my surroundings. It wasn't the classroom filled with rows of desks. The trees planted along the street, the waterway that ran beside the wide stone road, the court that was covered with grass; it was my second home, Lindus.

It seemed that I had been daydreaming for the first time in a while. I coughed to hide my embarrassment and greeted the person who appeared to be a customer.

"Wel-Welcome. Are you looking for a weapon?"

"Erm, yes."

The boy nodded.

He didn't look like someone on a really high level. He looked only a little older than me; black hair with a simple shirt, pants, and boots. The only armament he had was the one-handed sword on his back. The weapons in my shop required high stats and I was worried if he was on a high enough level, but I didn't let that show and led him into my shop.

"The one-handed sword display is over here."

As I pointed towards the case that displayed the basic weapons, he smiled a bit awkwardly and spoke.

"Ah, well, I wanted to order a custom made one..."

I became even more worried. Even the cheapest custom-made weapons, which needed special ingredients to forge, were over a hundred thousand col. If he started panicking at the price, then I would be embarrassed as well, so I tried to avoid that situation.

"The price of metals right now is a bit high, so I think it might be a little expensive..."

I told him that, but the boy clad in black said something totally unbelievable with an uncaring expression.

"You don't have to worry about the price. Please just forge the best sword that you can right now."

"..."

I just stared at the person's face for a moment and then somehow managed to open my mouth.

"...Well, even if you say that... I have to have some sort of idea about the quality..."

My tone was slightly rougher than usual, but he didn't seem to care about that and simply nodded.

"Well I suppose that's true. Then..."

He took off the sword on his back, still sheathed, and gave it to me.

"How about a sword with a similar or better quality than this one?"

It didn't look like a very impressive weapon. A handle with black leather twined around it; a hilt of the same color. But when I took it with my right hand—

It's heavy!!

I almost dropped the thing. The strength stat prerequisite was incredibly high. As a blacksmith and mace wielder, I was pretty confident in my strength stat. But I would never be able to swing this sword.

I hesitantly drew it from the sheath and the almost pitch black blade gleamed. I could tell that it was a high-quality sword with just a glance. I clicked it with my finger to call out the popup window: category «Long-sword/One-handed», unique name «Elucidator». It didn't have a maker name, which meant that this wasn't the work of a fellow blacksmith.

You can separate all weapons in Aincrad into two groups.

One is «Player made», which meant weapons made by us blacksmiths. The other included weapons that one gained from adventuring as «Monster drops». Needless to say, blacksmiths don't like drop weapons all that much. I couldn't even begin to count all the names like 'Unnamed' or 'No brand' that were given to them.

But this sword seemed to be a very rare item amongst monster drops. If you compared the average quality of player-made weapons and monster drops, the former was better. But once in a while, «Demon Swords» such as this one appeared — that was what I heard.

Anyhow, my pride was now on the line. As a blacksmith, there was no way I would lose to a drop weapon.

I returned the heavy sword and brought out a long sword that was hanging on the back wall of the shop. I had forged this sword a month ago and it was the best I could make right now. The blade that I drew from its sheath had a reddish tinge to it, which appeared as if it was covered by fire.

"This is the best sword in my shop right now. It most probably won't lose to yours."

He took the sword wordlessly, swung it with one hand, and then cocked his head.

"It's a bit light."

"...I used a speed type metal for it..."

"Hmm..."

He made a doubtful expression and swung the sword a few more times before he turned his gaze towards me and asked.

"Can I test this for a bit?"

"Test what...?"

"Durability."

The boy drew his sword, which he had been holding in his left hand, and put it on top of the counter. He then stood before it and slowly raised the red sword with his right arm.

I realized what he was about to do and tried to stop him.

"Wa-Wait! If you do that your sword will break!"

"If it's a sword that would break so easily then it's useless. If that happens I'll deal with it then."

"That's..."

That's totally crazy, is what I was going to say, but I stopped myself. He held the sword up above his head and his eyes shone sharply. Soon, the sword began to shine with a blue light.

"Hyah!"

With a shout, he swung the sword down at an amazing speed. The two blades clashed against each other before I even had the time to blink, and the impact rang loudly within the shop. Because the resulting flash was so bright, I squinted to take a look, and then involuntarily took a step back...

The blade was broken neatly in two and had been completely destroyed.

—The blade of my best work.

"AHHHHHH!!!"

I screamed and rushed to his right hand. I took the remaining half and carefully examined it from every angle.

...Repair... was impossible.

As soon as I came to that conclusion and sagged my shoulders, the remaining half scattered and became polygon fragments. After a few seconds of silence passed, I slowly raised my head.

"Wha...Wha..."

I grabbed the boy by the collar as my lips trembled.

"What are you going to do—!! It's broken—!!!"

"I-I'm sorry! I never even imagined that the sword I swung would break..."

...\*Snap\*.

"In other words, do you mean to say that my sword was weaker than you thought it was!?"

"Errr— ummm— well, yeah."

"Ah!! Now you're just going straight out!?"

I released his collar, put my hands on my hips, and straightened my chest.

"I— I'm telling you! If I had the right materials I could make weapons that would snap your sword just like that as much as I want!"

"—Oh?"

He smiled at the words I said in anger.

"Then I would really like to ask you to make that; something that could just snap this sword just like that."

He took the sword on the counter and sheathed it. The blood finally rushed all the way up my head and—

"So that's how it's gonna be!? Fine! Then you help too! Start with helping me get the ingredients!"

I knew I just made a mistake, but the milk was already spilt. There was no way I could back down now. Yet he wasn't shaken at all and rudely scrutinized me.

"...Well, I don't mind, but wouldn't it be better if I went by myself? It would be a problem if you got in the way."

"Argh—!!"

To think that there really was a person who was this good at getting on people's nerves. I waved my arms about wildly and protested like a little kid.

"Do-Don't take me so lightly! Even if I look like this, I'm a master mace wielder!"

"Whew~"

The boy whistled. Now he was just enjoying himself.

"Well then, I'll look forward to it. —Anyways, I'll pay for the sword I broke."

"There's no need to do that! Just remember that if I make a sword that's better than yours, I'll make you pay bucket loads!"

"Fine, as much as you want. —I'm Kirito. I hope we get along together until the sword is done."

I crossed my arms and looked away.

"I hope we get along too, Kirito."

"Uwa, you're calling me by my name just like that? Well, I'm fine with it. I hope we get along, Lisbeth."

"Kaaah—!!"

—It was the worst first impression ever for forming a party.

## Part 2

Rumors about «That Metal» began to circulate amongst the blacksmiths about ten days ago. Of course, the ultimate goal of SAO was to reach the top floor and beat the game. But other than that, there was also a variety of other missions: quests from NPCs, guard missions, treasure hunting, and more. But because the reward usually included desirable equipment, most quests had a cooldown time after they were completed before they would become available again. There were even quests that could only be finished once, which really drew attention from the players.

One of these missions was found in a hamlet in the corner of the 55th floor. A certain white-bearded village leader NPC would say—

There was a white dragon that lived in the mountains to the west, which ate crystals each day as its food and stocked large quantities of it to create an extremely valuable and rare metal within its stomach.

This was obviously a mission that awarded amazing materials, so a large number of people immediately formed an assault party that would be able to easily defeat the dragon.

—But they didn't get anything. The dragon dropped only a small quantity of Col and some poor quality equipment, which didn't even reimburse the cost of the healing potions and crystals used.

After that, everyone guessed that the metal had only a chance of dropping, therefore many parties spoke to the elder and then defeated the dragon, but still no one found the metal. Within one week, countless white dragons had been killed, but not a single party managed to find the metal. Someone finally suggested that there must be special conditions which must be met, so now everyone was trying hard to find out what those were.

After listening to my explanation, the man named Kirito, who sipped on the tea which I didn't want to make, who sat on my workshop chair with his casually crossed legs, replied 'Ah...' and nodded lightly.

"I've heard about this too. There does seem to be a chance to get rare ingredients. But so far no one has gotten anything right? Would we really get anything if we go now?"

"Amongst all the circulating theories, one of them claims that 'the party must include a blacksmith', because there aren't many blacksmiths who properly trained their combat skills."

"So that's why; actually that does sound kind of right — if that's the case, then we should get going soon."

"....."

I stared angrily at Kirito's face.

"I'm surprised you've managed to live till today with such a lack of common sense. This isn't goblin hunting! We have to form a good party and..."

"But if we do that, then even if the material drops, there's a chance we won't get it right? What floor is that white dragon on?"

"...55<sup>th</sup> floor."

"Heh— Then I should be fine even by myself; you don't even need to help."

"...Are you insanely strong, or just insanely stupid? Whatever, I don't care, the sight of you crying while teleporting away also sounds pretty interesting."

Kirito simply chuckled, finished his tea without answering, and placed the cup back down on the table.

"I'm ready to leave anytime; what about you, Lisbeth?"

"Ah— Never mind, since you're not going to add an honorific anyway, just call me Liz... the white dragon's mountain isn't very big, so we should be able to return today. Let me just make a few simple preparations."

After opening a console window, I first put on some simple armor over my skirt, then confirmed that my mace was in my inventory and made sure that I had enough potions and crystals.

I closed the window and said ok, then Kirito stood back up. Luckily, there were no customers in sight as we went from the workshop to the shop entrance. I quickly flipped the sign on the door.

I raised my head and looked out; the sunlight passing through was still bright, so there was still quite some time before it gets dark. Whether we retrieve the metal or not — the latter being more likely no matter how I thought about it — I wouldn't want to come back too late.

That being said.

—How did I wind up in this strange situation...

After leaving the store, I walked towards the gate plaza while thinking deeply.

I definitely had a bad impression of the black-dressed man leisurely walking beside me — as it should be. Not only did everything he say make me angry, he was also some arrogant megalomaniac, and most of all, he broke my masterpiece.

But still, I was walking alongside a man whom I just met. We even formed a party and prepared to hunt monsters on another floor; it was just like— like a da...

Arriving at this, I immediately forced a stop to that thought. I had never experienced anything like this until now. Although I was pretty close to several male players, I've always made excuses to avoid going out with them with just two people. I wanted to make sure that the first person I paired up with would be someone I really liked, or so I thought.

But when I came to my senses, I was already with this weird man... How did it end up like this!

Completely oblivious of my inner turmoil, Kirito saw a food vendor near the gate of the plaza and rushed over. By the time he turned around, a huge hot dog was already in his mouth.

"Doo yu van son duu?"

...My inner thoughts were instantly filled with a sense of helplessness and I felt like an idiot for being the only one worrying over it. So I yelled back:

"Yeah!"

The crisp taste of the hot dog — more precisely, a mysterious food that looked like a hot dog — still lingered in my mouth when we reached the rumored hamlet on the 55th floor.

We also didn't have any trouble with the monsters in the field.

Considering that the front line was on the 63<sup>rd</sup> floor right now, the monsters here were pretty strong. But my level was about 65, and that braggart Kirito should be just as strong, so we went through quite a few battles almost completely unscathed.

The only mistake was that the theme of this floor involved fields of snow and ice—

"Achoo!"

I sneezed loudly as soon as we entered the small village and relaxed. Because all the other floors were in an early summer season, I became too careless. Not only was there a layer of snow on the ground here, but every building still had huge icicles hanging from the roofs.

This bone-chilling winter cold made my entire body shiver like crazy. Kirito, who stood beside me, put on an exasperated expression and said:

"...You didn't bring any other clothes?"

"...No."

Then, the seemingly lightly-dressed Kirito operated his window. A black leather cape materialized, which he placed over my head.

"...Are you alright yourself?"

"It's all a matter of willpower."

Every line this man said gets on my nerves. But the fur-lined cape looked pretty warm, so I couldn't resist it and quickly put it on. I let out a sigh of relief as the cold bite of the wind immediately disappeared.

"Umm... which one do you think is the elder's house?"

As Kirito said this, I looked around the tiny village, and found an especially large house across from the central plaza.

"It should be that one right?"

"Right."

We both nodded and started walking.

—Several minutes later.

As we predicted, we found the white-bearded elder NPC and successfully initiated a conversation. His story was full of useless details that started from his long and boring childhood, into his teenage years, past his difficult days in adulthood, and then abruptly mentioned a white dragon in the mountains to the west. By the time he finally finished, the orange light of the setting sun had already covered the entire village.

We left the village elder's house feeling completely wiped out. The snow that covered the houses were stained orange by the setting sun. It was an image beautiful beyond comparison, yet—

"...I never expected just receiving the quest would waste that much time..."

"Unbelievable... well, what now? Should we wait until tomorrow?"

I turned my head and looked at Kirito.

"Hmmm— I've heard the white dragon is nocturnal though. Is that the mountain?"

Looking towards the direction Kirito pointed at, I saw a white peak reaching into the sky. Although I say that, the structural limitations of Aincrad meant the height couldn't possibly exceed 100 meters, so climbing the mountain shouldn't be difficult.

"Alright, let's go then. I want to see your crying face as soon as possible anyway."

"Just don't become overwhelmed by my magnificent sword skills."

We both turned our faces away from each other with a 'Hmph'. But somehow, how should I put it, even though I was arguing with Kirito, my heart began to feel a little shaky—

I forcibly shook my head to get rid of these stupid thoughts and then began to crunch my way through the snow.

Although the white dragon's mountain looked dangerously steep from far away, we discovered that it was actually very easy to climb.

When I thought about it, many impromptu teams managed to accomplish this without any trouble, so there was no way it could be hard.

Even though it was already evening, which affects the strength of spawned monsters, the strongest that would appear right now were ice skeletons called «Frost Bone». Furthermore, bone-type monsters were no match for my mace. I simply continued to smash them apart with clear crunching sounds.

After walking up the snow-covered roads for several dozen minutes and turning towards the plunging icy cliffs, we had already reached the mountaintop.

The bottom of the next floor was extremely close. Huge columns of broken crystal pillars stood out from the thick layer of snow. The purple light of the setting sun refracted through these columns and scattered into the rainbow colors of the spectrum, painting a scene that can only be portrayed in dreams.

"Whaa...!"

Just as I cheered without restraint and was about to dash over, Kirito grabbed onto my collar to stop me.

"Oi... What are you doing?!"

"Hey, get ready to use the crystals first."

Against his extremely serious expression, I could only meekly nod. I materialized the crystals and then put them into my apron pockets.

"Also, it'll get dangerous from here on out, so it would be best if I continued on alone. Once the white dragon appears, just hide behind that crystal pillar over there and absolutely do not come out."

"...Why? My level is pretty high too! I wanna help too!"

"No!"

Kirito's black pupils stared directly into my eyes. The moment our eyes met, I understood that this person was truly worried for my safety from the bottom of his heart, so I let out a huge sigh and backed off. I didn't say anything and simply nodded lightly.

A smile spread across Kirito's face as he patted my head and said "Alright, let's go." I could only keep on nodding.

It felt like the atmosphere suddenly changed entirely.

After travelling all the way here with Kirito, could it be that my feelings had changed? Or did I get caught up in the mood—? Either way, I completely did not recognize this as a life-threatening encounter.

Over half of my experience came from forging weapons, so I had never entered any merciless battlefields.

But I felt that this person was different. He had a gaze that only one who fought every day in the most dangerous places could have.

I continued to walk with my scrambled emotions before we soon arrived at the center of the peak.

We quickly looked around, but found no sign of the white dragon. However, we saw an area sealed by crystal pillars—

"Wow..."

There was a gigantic cave opening of at least ten meters in diameter. The light reflected off the walls reached down the deep hole, while an impermeable darkness covered even the deeper regions.

"That's really deep..."

Kirito kicked a small chunk of crystal into the hole. The falling crystal glittered briefly before completely disappearing without even a sound.

"Don't fall down."

"As if I would!"

Not long after I replied, a sharp feral screech pierced out from the cave and spread across the entire mountain through the air that was stained blue by the sunset.

"Hide behind there!"

Kirito pointed towards a gigantic crystal pillar nearby and spoke in a commanding tone. I hurriedly followed his instructions while waving exaggeratedly at Kirito's shadow and yelling:

"Hey... The white dragon's attacks are slashes using both claws, freezing breath, and blizzard assault... B-Be careful!"

After quickly adding that last phrase, I saw Kirito, who kept his back towards me pretending to be cool, gave a thumbs-up with his left fist. The space in front of him began to shake, and a huge shape exploded outwards from the hole.

Various large, strangely-shaped polygons appeared in a continuous stream. As those polygons appeared — they began connecting with one another and the identity of the huge shape grew more evident. The shriek that made people quiver uncontrollably resounded once again. Countless shards scattered outwards in every direction before disappearing into the light rays.

A white dragon covered in scale-like shards of ice had appeared. It slowly beat its gigantic wings while hovering in the skies. The situation was frightening — or it could be more appropriately described as extremely beautiful. It stared with large, ruby-colored eyes, casting a contemptuous look down upon the two of us.

Kirito calmly reached his hand towards his back and unsheathed his jet-black one-handed sword with a perfect chime. Then, as if the sound had sent off a signal, the white dragon opened his huge jaw — and with a hardened sound, sprayed out a wave of white gas.

"It's the breath! Get out of the way!"

Even though I screamed, Kirito didn't budge a single inch. He stood perfectly still and thrust upwards with the sword in his right hand.

There was no way such a thin weapon could block a breath attack—

As soon as I thought this, the sword began to spin like a windmill centered in Kirito's hand. Based on the light green color of the effect, it must be a sword skill. In just a second, the sword reached speeds invisible to the human eye and looked like it had become a shield of light.

The icy breath streamed directly towards the light shield while emitting a dizzying white light, which forced me to avert my eyes. But, when the cold air slammed into Kirito's sword-shield, it dispersed as if it had evaporated.

I quickly focused on Kirito's body to confirm his HP.

Maybe it was impossible to completely block the breath, because his life bar was slowly draining. But the shocking part was, the damage taken was recovering within just a few seconds. This must be the really high level battle skill «Battle Healing» — but to raise this skill, one must sustain enormous amount of battle damage. Considering the current floors, that was impossible to do so without endangering oneself.

Kirito — just who is he...?

Only now did I begin to seriously wonder about the identity of this black swordsman. His absurd power made him seem like a key strategic player. But his name wasn't amongst the list of KoB-dominated top guild players.

At this moment, Kirito, who accurately predicted the end of the icy onslaught, made his move. He burst through the snowy mist and leapt towards the dragon hovering in midair.

Normally, when fighting a flying enemy, one should first attack with a halberd or some sort of throwing weapon; only after long-range weapons knocked the enemy down to ground-level first did the short-ranged weapon users join the fray. But shockingly, Kirito flew upwards until he almost touched the white dragon's head, where he began to initiate consecutive sword combination techniques in midair.

With a sharp ring, Kirito's onslaught pummeled the white dragon's torso at a speed faster than the human eye could follow. Even though the white dragon retaliated with both of its claws, the difference in their capabilities was simply too much.

By the time Kirito slowly descended back down to the ground, the white dragon's HP bar was already down by over a third.

—It was single-handed slaughter. Watching this unbelievable battle made my spine shiver endlessly.

Suddenly the white dragon aimed at the grounded Kirito and blasted its icy breath, but this time he sprinted to dodge the attack and then leapt back up into the air. With a deep and heavy sound, a single powerful attack struck the target, and the white dragon's health dropped significantly.

The HP bar immediately changed from yellow to red, and the battle should conclude with just one or two more attacks. I decided that this time I would honestly praise Kirito's skill and took one step out from behind the crystal pillar.

At that moment, as if he had eyes on the back of his head, Kirito suddenly shouted:

"Idiot! Don't come out yet!"

"What? It's obviously about to finish right? Just hurry up and end it..."

As I replied in a loud voice—

The dragon, flying even higher than before, fully expanded its wings. As its wings beat forward, the snow directly below the dragon went flying with a \*bang\*.

".....?"

As I stood frozen in shock by the scene before me. Kirito stabbed his sword into the ground several meters in front of me and moved his mouth

like he wanted to tell me something, but his profile was immediately blocked by the snow. A moment later an incredible pressure, like a wall of wind, hit and easily blew me into the air.

Crap... The blizzard attack!

As I tumbled across the air, I finally remembered what I myself had just said about the white dragon's attacks. Thankfully, this skill didn't have much attack power, so I took virtually no damage. I spread open both my arms and took a posture for landing.

But as the snow dispersed — there was no ground in the clearing up ahead.

It was the gigantic hole atop the mountain peak. I had been blown into the air directly overhead this huge pit.

My thoughts immediately stopped; my entire body completely froze.

"You've got to be kidding me..."

With my mind completely paralyzed, I could only utter these words, while my right hand reached towards the air in vain—

—A hand covered in only a black-leather glove suddenly grasped my fingers.

My unfocused eyes suddenly sprang open.

...!

Kirito, who had been confronting the white dragon far away, sprinted over here at a frightening speed and leapt into the air without hesitation. He extended his right hand to grab onto mine and then pulled me into his embrace. After that he loosened his right arm to wrap around my back and hugged me tightly.

"Hold on tight!"

As I heard Kirito's voice reverberating beside my ear, I forgot myself and tightly hugged his body with both of my arms. We began to descend only an instant later.

In the center of the cave opening, the two of us fell straight down while holding onto each other. The wind howled in our ears and our coats flailed about wildly.

If this hole extended down to the surface of the floor, then falling from this height meant certain death. This thought suddenly passed through my mind, but I just didn't feel like this was actually happening right now. All I could do was to keep staring dumbly at the disappearing circle of white light.

Suddenly, Kirito's sword-wielding right arm began to move. He raised the sword forcibly and then swung it forward. A flash of light burst out, accompanied by the loud echoing \*clang\* of metal striking one another.

The strong counterforce changed our fall trajectory, pushing us towards the cave walls. The blue icy walls gradually approached, and I couldn't help but bite down my teeth. We were going to crash—!

Just as we were about to collide with the wall, Kirito raised the sword in his right hand once again and stabbed it into the wall at full power. Fiery sparks exploded outwards as if the weapon had struck a whetstone. The sudden attack slowed our falling speed, but it was unable to completely stop our descent.

The screeching sound of metallic cutting continued as Kirito's sword kept on cutting the wall of ice. I turned my neck to look down and noticed that we could already see the white snow-covered bottom of the cave. I watched it come closer and closer, until there were only a few seconds left before we crashed. I wanted to at least refrain from screaming, so I bit down on my lip and tightly held onto Kirito.

Kirito let go of his sword, used both arms to hold me tightly, and rotated his body so that he was on the bottom. Then—

An impact. A huge sound.

The snowflakes that were blasted into the air by the force of our fall began to land lightly on my cheeks before melting away.

The cold sensation pulled back my scattered thoughts. I opened my eyes, and my gaze met with that of Kirito's black pupils as he laid extremely close to me.

Kirito was still hugging me tightly; he raised the corner of his mouth and smiled weakly.

"...Still alive?"

I nodded back weakly and replied:

"Yeah, still alive."

For several dozen seconds — or maybe several minutes, we simply laid motionlessly in that position. The heat from Kirito's body allowed my entire self to relax and my mind to go completely blank.

After a while, Kirito let go of my arm and slowly stood back up. He first picked up the sword that fell nearby and returned it to his inventory, and then pulled out from his waist pouch a bottle of what was probably a high-class recovery potion, as well as another bottle for me.

"Anyhow, just drink it."

"...Okay."

I nodded and sat up to receive the potion while checking my own HP bar. I still had about one-third left, but Kirito, who had struck the ground directly, was already in the red zone.

I pulled off the cork and gulped down the sweet liquid in one breath, then turned towards Kirito. Remaining in my relaxed posture, I began to move the lips that have such a hard time saying anything nice.

"Ummm... Th-Thank you for saving me..."

Kirito weakly showed his usual sneer and replied:

"It's still too early to thank me."

He quickly glanced towards the sky.

"...Thank god the white dragon didn't chase us, but how are we going to get out of here..."

"Eh...? Can't we just teleport?"

I reached into my apron pocket and pulled out a sparkling blue crystal to show Kirito. But—

"That probably won't work, since this is a trap made especially for players, I doubt we'll be able to get out that easily."

"How could this be...?"

Kirito hinted at me with his eyes to try it out, so I held the crystal tightly and commanded:

"Teleport! Lindus!"

—My shout echoed emptily off the frozen walls before finally disappearing. The crystal simply continued to sparkle silently.

Kirito squeezed my shoulders lightly without making any sound.

"If I thought we could use crystals, then I would have already used it when we were falling. But because this place felt like it would be an anti-crystal zone..."

"..."

I dropped my head in despair; Kirito put his hand on my head with a \*pat\* and tousled my hair.

"Alright alright, don't cry. If we can't use crystals, then there must be another way out of here."

"...Maybe not, maybe this is an inescapable pit that guarantees death... Or should I say, we're already dead!"

"Hmmm, maybe you're right."

Watching Kirito nod in agreement made me lose all the energy in my body once again.

"What...What kind of attitude is that!? Can't you be a little more positive?"

After I suddenly yelled, Kirito smiled and said:

"That angry expression is much more like you, keep it up!"

"Wha.....?"

My cheeks flushed red and my body froze in place. Kirito then lifted his hand from my head and stood back up.

"Well, let's try some things out. Any ideas?"

"..."

I smiled bitterly at Kirito, who was clearly unaffected by the situation we were in and kept up his usual attitude. Feeling a bit more cheerful, I slapped my cheeks with both hands and stood up.

I surveyed my surroundings; the cave's bottom was a flat surface of ice with a hint of snow. The diameter should be about 10 meters just like the cave's opening. The icy walls near the top continued to reflect rays of light from the setting sun, but this place would soon be completely engulfed by darkness.

I looked around, but there was no visible way out on either the walls or the floor. I put both my hands on my waist, ran my brain at full capacity, and told Kirito the first idea that came to mind.

"Mm... Can we ask for help from someone?"

Kirito denied it instantly:

"Uh—— I'm guessing this place is considered a dungeon."

Players registered as 'friends,' such as Asuna in my case, can communicate through a type of mail called 'private message.' However, that function cannot be used within a dungeon, nor could the 'trace system' be used to locate them.

I opened the message window in blind hope, but as Kirito said, it was unavailable.

"Well... How about we shout at other players who come to hunt the dragon?"

"I think we are about 80 meters away from the apex, so my guess is that our voices won't reach that far."

"I guess so... Wait! Now you come up with an idea!"

When I retorted at Kirito, upset at him for constantly putting down my ideas, he replied with something preposterous:

"Run up along the wall."

".....Are you an idiot?"

"Well, let's find out."

While I stared at him with a dumbstruck expression, Kirito walked up to one side of the cave and started dashing toward the walls on the opposite side with unnatural speed. The snow blew off the floor and a gale of wind smashed into my face. Just as he was about to hit the wall, Kirito crouched

and leaped upwards with explosive force. He stepped on the walls at an unbelievable height and then started running diagonally along the wall.

"Oh my god..."

As I watched in awe, Kirito was already far above me and running upwards in a spiral along the walls like one of those ninjas from a third-rate movie. His silhouette got smaller and smaller—

Then, as he was a third of the way up, he suddenly slipped.

"Ahhhhhhhhh!!!"

Kirito floundered about as he fell towards my head.

"Kyaaaaa!!!"

As I backed off screaming, a human-shaped hole appeared right where I was standing. A minute later, after Kirito finished his second health potion, I sat down next to him and sighed.

"I kept thinking you were an idiot, but I never even considered that you were this stupid..."

"I would have succeeded if the initial approach was longer."

"Not a chance."

I blurted out softly.

Kirito ignored my words and returned the empty potion bottle to his pouch. After stretching his arms, he said:

"Well, it's getting too dark, so let's just camp here. Fortunately, I don't think any monsters spawn in this hole."

The sun had already set, and the bottom of the hole was getting quite dark.

"I guess so..."

"Well then..."

Kirito opened a window and materialized several things. A camp stove<sup>[1]</sup>, a pot, several small sacks that I couldn't tell what they were for, and two mugs came out.

"...You always carry these around?"

"I tend to camp out in the fields quite often."

He said it with such a serious expression that I don't think he was joking.

He clicked on the stove; it lit with a \*fwoosh\* and illuminated the place with a soft orange glow. Kirito put a pot over the stove, then tossed in a few chunks of snow before pouring in the contents of those small sacks. He closed the pot with a lid and doubled clicked it; a timer window for cooking then popped up.

Soon I began to smell a herbal aroma. Now that I thought about it, I hadn't eaten anything since that hot dog in the morning. My stomach suddenly demanded food loudly as if it just remembered that it was starving.

The cooking timer disappeared with a \*pin pon\*, and then Kirito split the contents of the pot into two mugs.

"Don't expect too much, my cooking proficiency is zero."

"Thank you..."

The warmth transferred to my hands through the mug that Kirito handed to me. It was a simple soup of dried meat and herbs, but the ingredients' item levels seemed to be high and it was more than delicious. The heat also spread throughout my cold body.

"What a mysterious feeling this is... I don't feel like this is real."

I mumbled as I drank the soup.

"I mean this situation, camping in an unexplored area and having a meal with a stranger..."

"Ah, I guess so... since you are an artisan. I make PuGs<sup>[2]</sup> with random players and camp with them quite often."

"Hmm, really? ...Tell me some more, about the dungeons and everything."

"Huh? Mm...okay. I don't think it's that interesting though... oh wait, before I start....."

Kirito collected the empty mugs and pot, and returned them to his inventory. He opened the panel again and materialized what looked like two rolled up chunks of cloth.

After he unfolded them, they revealed themselves to be sleeping bags. They looked similar to their real world equivalents, only significantly larger.

"These are high-end items. Perfect heat preservation, plus a hiding effect against aggressive monsters."

He tossed me one as he smiled. When I laid it on the snow, it looked like it could fit three people of my size. Dumbfounded by the size of it, I spoke to Kirito:

"It's remarkable that you bring these things everywhere, and especially two of them....."

"Well, I should utilize my inventory space for something."

Kirito quickly unequipped himself and laid down in the sleeping bag on the left. I also unequipped my cloak and mace, and rolled into the sleeping bag. It was a high-end item all right; the inside was very warm, and a lot fluffier than it looked. We were a meter apart with the stove in between us. But I was still feeling a little... embarrassed, so I spoke again to get rid of the silence:

"Mm...yeah, go on with the story..."

"Oh, sure..."

Kirito slowly started talking after he laid his head on his hands.

He told me about the time when he got trapped by MPK — criminals who purposely gathered mobs to ambush other players — in a dungeon. And a story of fighting a boss mob with low damage but an obscene amount of health for two full days by taking turns to sleep with other players. There was also the time he rolled dice with 100 other players for a rare item. All of his stories were thrilling, delightful, and somewhat humorous. His stories also made one thing obvious—— he was one of the Clearers, those who risk their lives on the frontline. But that also meant this person was burdened with the fates of thousands of players. He wasn't the type of person who should risk his life just to save me.

I turned toward Kirito and looked at his face. His black eyes were reflecting the light from the stove.

"Hey... Kirito, can I ask you something...?"

"—Why so serious all of a sudden?"

"Why did you save me at that moment...? There was no guarantee that you would have succeeded. Well, it was more likely that you were just going to die with me, so... Why.....?"

Kirito's expression hardened for a second, but he immediately relaxed to his usual face and responded with a calm voice:

"...I would rather die alongside them than watch someone else die without doing anything. Especially if that someone is a girl like you, Liz."

"...You really are an idiot. You are probably the only one who would say such a thing."

Although I retorted sarcastically, my eyes couldn't help but weep. A part of my heart ached, and I tried my hardest to control and hide it. I haven't heard such stubborn, upright, and warm words since I came to this world. No, I haven't heard such words even before in the real world.

The painful feelings of loneliness and wanting to interact with others more that had been buried deep within a corner of my heart suddenly flared and engulfed me like a tempest. I wanted Kirito's warmth close enough for my heart to feel—

Without realizing it, the words spilled forth from my mouth:

"Would you... hold my hand?"



I turned towards Kirito, pulled my right arm out of the sleeping bag, and reached towards my left.

Kirito's eyes widened slightly, but he answered 'Yes' in a small voice and held out his left hand. When our fingers touched, we both jerked our hands away for a second, but then reached in again to grasp our hands together.

I held onto Kirito's hand tightly, which was a lot warmer than the soup that I just ate. Although the back of my hand was still laying on the ice, I didn't feel any coldness. I felt human warmth. I felt like I had finally figured out what the longing was that had settled in a corner of my heart ever since I came to this world.

Because I was afraid of becoming aware of the fact that this world was an illusion— that my real body was somewhere far away, unreachable no matter how hard I tried, I continued to set goals for myself and focused everything on my job. I convinced myself that leveling up my blacksmithing skills and expanding my store was my reality.

But some part of me always knew that this was all a fake, nothing more than simple data. What I starved for was true human warmth.

Of course, Kirito's body was also data. The warmth that I feel now were just electric signals for my brain to react to. But I finally realized that it didn't matter. I could feel his heart ——— whether in the real world or in this simulated world, this was the only truth.

As I held Kirito's hand firmly, I smiled and closed my eyes. Although my heart was beating faster than ever, sleep came to me regrettably quick and dragged my consciousness into the pleasant darkness.

### Part 3

A refreshingly sweet scent gradually drifted past my nose; I slowly opened my eyes and saw the entire world enveloped by a white glow. The dawning light, which had already been reflected several times down the icy walls, caused the snow at the bottom of the cave to glitter.

I shifted my eyes and noticed a teapot sitting atop the lantern, with vapor wavering above it. Looks like that's where the smell was coming from. In front of the lantern sat a person in black clothes whose face I could only see from the side. But as soon as I saw that figure, a small flame seemed to ignite within my heart.

Kirito turned his head, revealed a tiny smile, and said:

"Morning."

".....Morning."

I replied. As I prepared to get up, I noticed that my right hand, which should have been hanging outside when I went to sleep, was neatly placed back inside the sleeping bag. I brought the warmth that lingered in that palm to my lips, and then suddenly jumped up.

Kirito brought a steaming mug to me, who had just crawled out onto the snow. After thanking him, I accepted the mug and sat down beside him. In it was a kind of flowery tea with a mint-like aroma which I had never tasted before. As I slowly drank the tea one sip at a time, allowing it to gently sink into my body. My heart pleasantly warmed up.

I shifted my body, leaning it right against Kirito's. As I turned my head, our eyes met for an instant before quickly separating. For a short while, only the sounds of two people drinking tea could be heard.

"Hey....."

Finally, I murmured with a small voice while my eyes continued to stay fixed on my cup.

"Hmmm?"

".....If we really can't get out of here, then what should we do?"

"Spend every day sleeping."

"That sure was a quick reply. Think about it a little more!"

I smiled as I prodded Kirito's arm with my elbow.

".....Although, that wouldn't be bad either....."

After saying this, I began to lean my head towards Kirito's shoulder—

"Ah.....!?"

Kirito suddenly cried out and leaned forward. I, losing my support, ended up falling onto the ground with a \*plop\*.

"Geez, what was that for!"

I complained angrily as I straightened my torso back up, but Kirito stood up without even looking back. Following that, he sprinted towards the middle of that circular pit.

While in doubt, I also got up and followed him.

"Just what is it?"

"Oh, just a little....."

Kirito knelt down onto the floor and began to brush aside the snow, piled up on the ground, with both hands. He quickly dug up a deep hole as a scraping sound reverberated. And then—

"Ah!?"

A beam of silvery light suddenly flashed into my eyes. Something buried deep inside the snow was reflecting the light of the rising sun.

Kirito dug that thing out, seized it with both hands, and then stood back up. Unable to restrain my curiosity, I peered into it from an extremely close distance.

It was a transparent, silvery-white, rectangular object. Just slightly bigger than both of Kirito's hands. It was of a familiar shape, with a familiar size — a metallic material. But I had yet to see one of this color.

I tapped the material lightly with my right hand's fingers. An automatic window immediately popped up. The object was named «Crystalite Ingot».

"This— Isn't this..."

As I looked up towards Kirito's face, he too, nodded with a confused expression.

"Yeah... This is the metal we've been looking for... I wonder why it's here..."

"But, just why was it buried here?"

"Hmm....."

Kirito continued to stare at the ingot grasped in his right hand as he thought about it, before letting out a short, "Ah..."

"...The white dragon eats crystals..... which are refined in its stomach to become..... Hehe, so that's how it goes!"

He seemed to have figured it out and started showing a smile, then tossed the metal ingot towards me. I hurriedly caught it with both hands and held it close to my chest.

"Hey, what's with that! Don't just stop after figuring it out yourself!"

"This cave isn't a trap. It's the dragon's nest."

"Eh-? Eeh?"

"In other words, that ingot is the dragon's excretion. Its feces."

"Fe..."

While my cheeks were twitching, I dropped my glance at the ingot at my chest.

"Geeee"

Without thinking, I threw it back at Kirito.

"Woah"

That was repelled back by Kirito skillfully with his fingertips. After childishly throwing it at each other repeatedly, it finally came to a closure with Kirito making quick work of expanding the item field to store the ingot.

"Well, anyway, we accomplished our goal. Now, all that's left is....."

"If only we could get out of here..."

Both of us sighed as we exchanged glances.

"For the time being, there's no choice but to try everything we can come up with."

"I guess so. Aah, if only I had wings like the dragon..."

It happened the moment I said that. Realizing something, I left my mouth agape, at a loss for words.

"...What's up, Liz?"

Facing towards Kirito, who was peering at me, with his head tilted to the side.

"Hey. You said this place was the dragon's nest, right?"

"Ah. As long as there are feces, that's..."

"That's not important! Dragons are nocturnal, now that it's morning, shouldn't it be returning to its nest..."

"..."

For a short while, my glance met with Kirito's, who became silent, and then both of us looked up into the sky at the entrance of the hole. Exactly at that moment...

Far up, high in the air, within the circular-cut white light, a blurred black shadow was born. That shadow grew ever bigger as we stared at it. It took only an instant before I could soon see a pair of wings, a long tail and four feet armed with claws.

"It's...It's..."

We backed off together. However, of course, there wasn't any place to escape to.

"It's here——"

Both of us shouted while drawing our respective weapons.

The white dragon, that swooped down into the pit, noticed our presence and made a high pitched cry, stopping just before hitting the ground. Its red eyes with vertical pupils were filled with clear hostility towards the intruders of its nest. However, there was nowhere to hide at the bottom of the narrow hole. I prepared my mace while suppressing my nervousness.

Similarly, Kirito readied his one-handed sword and moved in front of me, quickly saying.

"Listen, stay behind me. Drink a potion immediately after losing even a little HP."

"Y-Yeah..."

I simply nodded obediently this time.

The dragon opened its vast mouth and roared once more. Its wings created a gust of wind, which made snow whirl into the air.

\*Bitan!\* \*Bitan!\* The dragon's long tail was striking the ground, each hit digging a deep ditch in the snowy surface.

Brandishing the sword in his right hand without pause, as to gain the initiative, Kirito suddenly ceased his movement just as he was about to charge forth.

"...Ah... Maybe..."

He let out in a low voice.

"Wha-What's the matter?"

"No..."

Without answering my question, Kirito kept his sword in its scabbard, abruptly turned around and firmly embraced me with his left arm.

"Ehh!?"

Without understanding anything, I panicked and I was further raised up to Kirito's shoulder.

"H-Hey, what are you— Wahh!!"

A \*Zuban!\* rang out with the impact, and together with that, the surroundings' scenery went blurry. Kirito dashed towards the wall with violent force. Just before crashing, he did a great jump, and just like yesterday's attempt to escape, he began running on the curved wall surface. However, as if there was no intention to ascend, the orbit stayed level. The dragon's head heartily turned and continued targeting us, however Kirito continued running at a speed exceeding what the dragon could follow.

A few seconds later, when Kirito finally landed on the bottom of the hole, my eyes were completely spinning. Finally opening my eyes after blinking

them countless times, before me was the rear of the dragon. It had lost sight of us and was restlessly swinging its head left and right.

Just as I thought that Kirito was planning to attack from behind, he surprisingly quietly approached the dragon— With his right hand stretched out, he forcefully grabbed the tip of the dragon's swaying tail.

At that moment, the dragon let out a high-pitched cry. A shriek of surprise— or maybe that was just my imagination. Being increasingly unable to comprehend Kirito's intentions, I was just about to let out a scream too.

All of a sudden, the white dragon spread out both of its wings and began a sharp ascent at terrific speed.

"Oof!"

The air struck my face. Without even the time to think about that, our bodies flew out in midair with a force like that of being shot out of a bow. While we held onto the dragon's tail, it shook left and right as it ran up the pit. The circular bottom of the pit became distant very quickly.

"Liz! Hold on!!"

In response to Kirito's voice, I clung onto his head in a trance. The sunlight that shone on the surrounding ice ridges grew steadily brighter with the pitch of the sound of the cutting winds changing subtly— At the moment I thought the world exploded in a white radiance, we were flown outside of the hole.

The moment I opened my squinting eyes, a bird's-eye view of the vast 55th floor spread out below me.

Directly below me was a beautiful cone-shaped snowy mountain. Slightly further off, a small village. Beyond the vast snow field and the thick forest, the pointed roofs of every house of the main district were joined together. The scene where all of these were glittering, struck by the radiant sunlight, even made me forget about the terror, and I unintentionally cheered.

"Waa..."

"Yeah—!!"

Kirito too shouted loudly, and let his right hand go from the dragon's tail. He carried me like a child and entrusted himself to the inertia, dancing in the air.

The flight was only for several seconds, yet it felt like ten times that. I believe I was smiling. The overwhelming light and winds were sweeping through my heart. My emotions were being sublimated.

"Kirito— You know, I!!"

I shouted with all my heart.

"What!?"

"I-I like you!!"

"Come again!? I didn't hear that!!"

"It's nothing!!"

Clinging on tightly to his head, I burst out in laughter. Eventually, this moment, which felt almost like a miracle, ended, and we closed in on the ground. Turning about one last round, Kirito greatly widened his legs and took up a landing posture.

The snow went, \*Bafun!\*, as it flew up into the air. A long glide. Pushing our way through the white crystals like a snow-plow as we were slowing down, we finally stopped near the mountain summit.

"...Fuu."

Kirito took a breath of air and dropped me onto the ground. With reluctance, I turned my head and unwrapped my arms from him.

The both of us looked towards the direction of the big hole together; the dragon which seemed to have lost sight of us slowly flew circles in the skies.

Kirito placed his hand on the sword on his back, drawing the blade slightly, but immediately soon returned it to its scabbard with a \*cling\* sound. With a light smile on his face, he faced the dragon and said softly.

"...You must have been troubled by all of those turning up to hunt you till now. Once the method of getting the item is spread, the people coming to kill you should be gone too. So from now on, live without worries."

—Facing a monster, which only moved according to the system configured algorithm, and doing such a thing; that was something I would have thought of as stupid up till yesterday. But for some reason, I somehow felt that I could meekly welcome Kirito's words into my heart now. Reaching out with my right hand, I gently grasped Kirito's left hand.

The both of us silently watched over the scene as the white dragon turned its head about, before giving a single clear cry and descended into its nest. Silence arrived.

Before long, Kirito glanced this way, and spoke.

"Well then, let's get back?"

"I guess so."

"Want to go with the crystal?"

"...No, let's walk back."

I answered while smiling and stepped forward holding Kirito's hand. I then realized something and looked at Kirito's face.

"Ah... The lantern and bedroll and such, we left them behind, didn't we."

"Now that you mentioned it... Well, it's okay. Somebody might make use of it."

We exchanged glances and laughed, this time for sure, we began to slowly walk the mountain trail, following the road home. I took a quick look around my nearby surroundings, the skies were clear, without a single cloud in the sky.

"I'm back!"

I vigorously opened the door of my dear home.

"Welcome back."

Despite the store-tending female NPC standing at the counter merely giving a polite reply to my greeting, I waved my hand and turned about, looking around my store. I had only been away for a mere one day, but strangely enough, it seemed fresh.

Kirito, who had bought take-out from the same stall as yesterday, entered the store behind me, with a hot dog held in his mouth.

"It's almost noon after all, so you should have just eaten it in that stall."

As I voiced out my complaints, Kirito grinned as he waved his left hand, bring out a window.

"Before that, let's get to making it already, the sword."

Deftly manipulating the inventory, he materialized the silver ingot. Carefully catching it — ignoring the origin of the item for the moment — I nodded.

"That's right, let's do it. Come over to the workshop."

Opening the door behind the counter, the thudding sound of the waterwheel became conspicuously louder. Pulling down the lever on the wall, the bellows began to move, delivering air in. The furnace immediately began to glow a vivid red.

I gently dropped the ingot into the furnace, and turned back towards Kirito.

"A single-handed straight sword is fine, right?"

"Yep. I'm counting on you."

Kirito nodded as he sat on the circle stool meant for visitors.

"Understood. —Just a word of warning, but the end result has an aspect of randomness to it, so don't expect too much from it, alright?"

"We can just go get it again if it fails. This time with a rope."

"...Yeah, a long one."

Recalling that grand fall, I unwittingly let out a smile. Dropping my sight to the furnace, I noticed that the ingot seemed to have been sufficiently heated. Taking it out with pliers, I placed it onto the anvil.

I picked up my favorite smithing hammer from the wall, did the setup on the menu, and took another glance towards Kirito's face. In reply to his silent nodding, I smiled, and grandly lifted the hammer over my head.

I forged my spirit in as I hit the metal gleaming crimson; along with a clear \*Kan!\* sound, bright sparks generously scattered about.

Within the section on smithing in the Reference Help, about the manufacturing process, "According to the type of weapon being created, and the rank of metal used, the ingot will need to be hit a certain number of times." was all that was used to describe it.

In other words, during the deed of striking the metal with the hammer, there was no possibility for the player's skill to affect anything; this should be how it should be read, but there were all kinds of rumors and occult-like theories floating about SAO, that the precision of the striking rhythm and the fighting spirit of the blacksmith is able to manipulate the result, such goes the firmly ingrained opinions around.

I think of myself as a rational person, but I only put faith in this theory through my long time of experience. Therefore, I would lose any excess thoughts when producing arms, concentrating my awareness within the right hand throwing down the hammer, striking without stop with my mind blank— that is what I believed.

However.

While hitting the ingot, producing refreshing clanking sounds, various thoughts whirled about in my mind now, unable to leave.

If the sword was made successfully, and the request finished— Kirito would naturally return to the clearing at the frontlines, and there should not be many chances to meet up. Even if he comes for maintenance on the sword, that would be once every ten days at best.

Something like that— I don't want something like that. I felt a voice shouting so within myself.

While hungering for the warmth of another— No, that was why, that was the reason why I hesitated shortening the distance with any particular male player up until now. I was afraid of the lonely winter within me completely changing with love. That was not true love, just a delusion created by an illusionary world; that was what I thought.

But last night, while feeling the warmth from Kirito's hands, I realized, that those feelings of hesitation were the illusionary thorns that bound me. I am myself— The blacksmith, Lisbeth, and at the same time, Shinozaki Rika. Kirito was the same. Not a character from a game, but an actual living human being. Hence, my love for him; these feelings are real too.

If I manage to hit up a satisfying sword, I'll confess my feelings to him. That I want him to be by my side, that I want him to come back to this home from the labyrinth, everyday, that's what I'll tell him.

By the time the ingot was forged, its radiance shining ever brighter, the feelings within myself too, seemed to have been firmed up as well. I felt my feelings flowing out from my right hand, streaming into the weapon born from the hammer.

—And so, the moment had finally arrived.

I did not know how many times it had occurred thus far — probably somewhere between two hundred to two hundred and fifty times — immediately following the sound of the hammer, the ingot let loose a noticeably dazzling white gleam.

The rectangular object changed its shape bit by bit as it shone. It began growing palely from its front and rear, and next, a bulge that resembled a hilt swelled outwards.

"Ohh..."

Letting out murmurs of wonder in a low tone, Kirito got up from the chair, and approached. As we watched over side by side, the object generation was completed in several seconds, finally revealing its shape as a single long sword.

Beautiful; it was a truly beautiful sword. As a one-handed longsword, it was rather gorgeous. The blade was pale, and though not to the extent of a rapier, it was slender. As if it had inherited the property of the ingot, it could be seen as extremely slightly transparent. The blade was colored a blinding white. The grip was silver, with a slight tinge of blue.

«A World Where The Sword Symbolizes The Player»; as if to support that promised phrase, the variety of weapons set up in SAO were outrageously numerous. If one were to list down the names peculiar to the weapons included in each category from the start, it was said that it would likely be thousands of lines long.

Unlike a normal RPG, the diversity of those distinguishing names spread out further as the rank of the weapons increased. Lower ranked weapons, for example, within the one-handed longswords, «Bronze Sword», «Steel Sword»; for the swords with such dull names, countless numbers of them existed in this world; but as for weapons of the highest rank such as the

one present here right now, taking something like Asuna's «Lambent Light» for example, there is likely only one in the world, literally a one-of-a-kind object.

Of course, rapiers with the same level of ability, regardless of whether they are player-made or dropped from monsters, probably do exist. But each of them has a different name, possessing different appearances. And with that, high level weapons have a certain charm to them, becoming something like a partner with whom you share your spirit with.

Since the weapon's name and appearance are decided by the system, even we, the manufacturers, do not completely understand it. I lifted up the sword glittering atop the anvil— or at least, I tried to; I was surprised by the weight, unsuitable for its elegant outward appearance. It had a physical strength requirement that was not inferior to the black sword Kirito holds, «Elucidator». Straining my back, I brought it up before my chest with a cry.

Reaching out with a finger on my right hand supporting the base of the sword blade, I gave it a single click. I looked into the popup window that rose to its surface.

"Well, its name seems to be «Dark Repulser». It's the first time I've heard that, so I don't believe it's mentioned on the information store's list at the moment. —Here, try it out."

"Okay."

Kirito nodded and, reaching out with his right hand, he gripped the sword's handle. He lifted it up with actions that seemed unaffected by its weight. Waving his left hand to draw out the main menu, he manipulated the equipment figure, targeting the white sword. With this, the sword would be equipped to Kirito in the system, allowing for its numerical potential to be confirmed.

But Kirito immediately closed the menu, and having taken several steps back, he switched it to his left hand, swinging a few times with swishing sounds.

"—How is it?"

I asked without delay. Kirito gazed at the blade for a short moment in silence, but— soon, he smiled with a broad grin.

"It sure is heavy. ...It's a good sword."

"Really!? ...Alright!!"

I assumed a triumphant pose with my right hand without thinking. With that hand reached out, I bumped it against Kirito's right fist.

It had been a while since I felt this way.

Long ago— During the time I did sales from a street stall on the main streets of the tenth floor, I felt this way when my recklessly made arms were praised by customers. I'm glad I became a blacksmith, that was what I would honestly feel, from the bottom of my heart for that instant. When I went on to master my skills and move on to do business with only the high leveled players, I had forgotten about this feeling before I realized it.

"...It's a problem with my heart, huh... all of it..."

Towards the words I casually leaked out, Kirito inclined his head with a curious look.

"N-No, it's nothing. —Putting that aside, let's have a drink somewhere. I'm hungry."

Raising my voice to hide my embarrassment, I pushed Kirito's shoulders from behind. I thought to get out of the workshop in that posture, but— a question suddenly came to me.

"...Hey."

"Hm?"

Kirito looked back over his shoulder. That hung on his back; the black one-handed sword.

"Speaking of which— In the beginning, you did say, a sword equal to this one, didn't you. That white one certainly is a good sword, but I don't think there's much difference with that monster dropped one. Why would you need two swords resembling each other?"

"Aah..."

Kirito turned about, staring at me with an expression that showed that he was hesitating over something.

"Well, I can't explain everything. If you won't ask any further than that, I can tell you."

"What's with that? Acting all cool."

"Step back a little."

After I stepped back alongside the workshop's walls, with the white sword still hung down, Kirito drew the black sword, from his back with a high-pitched sound, with his right hand.

"...?"

I couldn't comprehend his intentions. After having manipulated the equipment figure earlier, with the current system, his equipped status should be only the sword in his left hand; holding onto another weapon with his right hand should not be of any use whatsoever. On the contrary, with something that's considered an irregular equipped status like that, it would not be possible to activate sword skills.

Glancing towards my confused face for a mere instant, Kirito calmly assumed a stance with the left and right swords. The right sword in front, the left sword behind. Dropping his hips slightly, and with that, in the very next instant.



A scarlet flash effect burst out, dyeing the workshop in its color.

The swords in Kirito's hands alternated, attacking his front with a speed that could not be followed by sight. \*Kyubabababa!\*, these sounds exerted pressure on the very air, and despite not actually aimed at anything, the objects within the room rattled.

It was obviously a sword technique arranged by the system. But— I have never heard of anything like a skill that uses two swords!

In front of me, standing stock still as I caught my breath, Kirito silently raised his body, having finished the consecutive attack technique that probably reached ten chained hits.

Clearing away both swords— returning only the sword in his right hand to his back, he looked at my face and spoke.

"And well, that's how it is. —I'll need a scabbard for this sword. Can I choose one?"

"Ah... Y-Yeah."

Just how many times had I already been dumbfounded by Kirito. Although I should have been used to it by now, for the time being, I decided to hold back my questions, reaching my hand towards the wall, displaying the home menu.

Scrolling through the storage screen, I gazed through the summary for the stock of scabbards I collected from craftsmen I was close to. Picking out one rather similar to the one equipped on Kirito's back, made from black leather, I materialized it. After I set in a small logo of my shop, I handed it over to Kirito. Kirito, having stored the white sword into the scabbard with a brief sound, opened a window and stashed it away. I thought he would equip both of them on his back, but it didn't seem that way.

"...So it's a secret? That earlier."

"Nn, well, yeah. Don't tell anyone about it, alright?"

"Got it."

Skill information is one's greatest lifeline, so if he tells me not to ask, I won't pursue the matter. That aside, I was glad that he even allowed me even a peek at his secret, and nodded with a small smile.

"...Well then."

Kirito placed his hands on his hips and his expression changed.

"This would be the end of my request. I'll be paying for the sword. How much?"

"Aah, that's..."

I bit my lips for a moment— I verbalized the reply that had always been seething within me.

"I won't need, any payment."

"...Eeh?"

"In return for that, I want Kirito to make me your exclusive smith."

Kirito's eyes showed slight signs of surprise.

"...Just what, do you mean by that...?"

"Whenever you complete your clearing, come over here, and let me do maintenance on your equipment... —Everyday, from now on, without fail."

My heartbeat heightened without bounds. Whether this was a feeling from my virtual body, or perhaps my actual heart, too, was throbbing in the same way as well— I wondered about that in a corner of my mind. My cheeks were on fire. Every single part of my face must have turned completely red right now.

Even Kirito, who had always maintained his poker face, seemed to have realized the meaning behind my words, and hung his red face down from shyness. I had always thought of him as older, but after seeing him in that state, it appeared like he was of the same generation, or perhaps even younger than me.

I mustered up my courage and took a step forward, taking a hold on his arm.

"Kirito... I..."

I cried those words out so loudly the time we escaped from the dragon's nest, but when speaking of it now, my tongue refuses to move. I kept staring into Kirito's black pupils, willing that single word to come out one way or another— It was then.

The workshop's door was forcefully opened. I released Kirito's hand by reflex, and jumped.

"Liz, I was so worried!!"

The person, who rushed in right after that instant, hugged me with the same force as a body slam while shouting out in a large voice. That chestnut-colored long hair softly danced in the air.

"Ah, Asuna..."

Asuna continued speaking without pause, staring closely at my face, locked in a dumbfounded expression, the entire time.

"Messages couldn't reach you; your map position couldn't even be traced; not to mention your regular customers didn't know anything about it, so just where did you go last night!? I even went all the way to the Black Iron Castle to check, you know!"

"So-Sorry. I just got stuck in a labyrinth for a bit..."

"A dungeon!? Liz, you went alone!?"

"Nah, with that person..."

I pointed in the direction diagonally behind Asuna with my glance. Asuna spun around, and after noticing that swordsman dressed in black standing there, looking bored, she froze with her eyes and mouth left open blankly. Following that, in a voice an octave higher—

"Ki-Kirito-kun!?"

"Eeh!?"

This time, it was my turn to be amazed. I looked over at Kirito, who was standing up straight, just like Asuna.

He gave a small cough, and spoke as he raised his right hand.

"Well, Asuna, it's been a while... or not, I suppose. A couple of days."

"Y-Yeah. ...That was surprising. I see, so you came here right away. If you had told me, I could have come along."

Asuna hid her palms behind her, and laughed shyly, tapping the floor repeatedly with the heels of her boots. I saw those cheeks slightly tinged with the shade of cherry blossom pink.

And I understood the entire situation.

It was not mere coincidence that brought Kirito to this shop. Keeping that promise with me, Asuna recommended this place... to the person in her heart.

—Just what should I do...? Just what should I do?

All that swirled around in circles within my mind, were those words. I felt like the heat from my entire body was slowly flowing out from the tips of my feet. I can't feel any strength. I can't breathe. Emotions came forth, without any way to release them...

Turning around to face the rigid me, Asuna casually spoke.

"This guy, did he say anything rude to Liz? He probably requested for one absurd thing or another, right?"

And with that, she slightly inclined her head to the side.

"Eh... But, that would mean, that you were with Kirito-kun last night?"

"W...Well..."

I took a step forward in that instant, grasped Asuna's right hand, and pushed open the door of the workshop. I looked towards Kirito for a bit, and rapidly spoke as I tried to not look at his face.

"Please wait for a short while. We'll be right back, so..."

I pulled Asuna's hand in that manner, exiting through the counter. Shutting the door, we went outside the shop through the gap between the display windows.

"Wait, wait, Liz, what's the matter?"

Despite hearing Asuna's questioning voice, I silently headed towards the main street, continuing to walk at a quick pace. I just couldn't bear to stay in front of Kirito any further. If I didn't escape, it seemed like I would have run into the realization that I had lost my way.

As though she had noticed my abnormal state, Asuna silently followed without saying another word. I gently released the girl's hand.

We entered the side street facing east, walked for a short while, and found a small sidewalk cafe that seemed like it was being hidden by the high stone wall. There wasn't a single customer. I chose a table at the edge, and sat down on a white chair.

Asuna peered into my face as she sat on the opposite side, not giving any impression of her thoughts.

"...What's the matter, Liz...?"

I strained to gather the slightest bit of vigor I could, putting a large smile on my face. The same smile as always, the one from times we cheerfully exchanged gossip.

"...Well, it's that person, isn't it...?"

Crossing my arms, I leaned in to look into Asuna's face.

"E-Eeh?"

"The one Asuna likes!"

"Ah..."

Asuna casted her eyes down, her shoulders appearing to narrow. She gave a nod with her cheeks blushed.

"...Yeah."

\*Throb\*; as I ignored the sharp pain that jabbed itself into my chest, I showed a broad grin yet again.

"Well, he certainly is a strange person; a really strange one."

"...Did Kirito-kun do something...?"

I gathered all my might and replied with a nod, to the worry-looking Asuna.

"He just went and broke the best sword in my store all of a sudden."

"Wah... So-Sorry..."

"It's not really something Asuna has to apologize for."

Looking at Asuna who was crossing her hands as if she had done the deed herself, something deep within my chest throbbed further.

Just a bit more... It's just a bit more, keep going, Lisbeth.

Whispering to myself in my heart, I somehow managed to maintain my smile.

"Well, anyway, to create the type of sword requested by that person, it turned out that a rare metal was necessary, so we went to the upper floors to get it. And during that, we got caught in some minor trap, you see; we had trouble escaping from it, that's why I wasn't back."

"So that was it... You could have just called for me, ah, messages couldn't be sent either, huh...?"

"I should have invited Asuna along too, sorry about that."

"No, the guild had clearing activities yesterday, so.... So, did you make the sword?"

"Ah, yeah. Geez, I wouldn't want to do this kind of troublesome work again."

"You should definitely charge him a real high price for that."

We started laughing at the same time.

I kept a small smile on my face, and mentioned one final comment.

"Well, he's weird, but certainly not a bad person. I'll be rooting for you, so do your best, Asuna."

That was the limit. The end of my words trembled.

"Y-Yeah, thanks..."

As Asuna nodded, she inclined her head to the side and looked into my face. Before she could see what were hidden under my eyelids, I sharply stood up, and spoke.

"Ah, oh no! I-I had an appointment arranged to buy some stock. I'll be going down for a bit!"

"Eh, in the store... What about Kirito-kun?"

"Go keep him company, Asuna! I'll be counting on you!"

I turned about, and broke into a run. I looked at Asuna, behind my back, and hurriedly waved my hand at her. There was no way I could turn back.

After I ran towards the gate plaza, all the way to a place where I could not see that open cafe from, I took the first turn, bending towards the south. I kept to the edge of the town, aiming at the areas without players, single-mindedly running without pause.

When my view distorted, I wiped my eyes with my right hand. Wiping them over and over again as I ran.

When I noticed, I had reached all way just before the castle walls that surrounded the town. Before the gently curving walls stretching out, large trees were planted in regular spaces from each other. I entered the shade under one of them, standing still with my hand on its trunk.

"Uguu... Uu..."

My voice leaked out from my throat, without the slightest attempt to muffle it. The tears I had desperately forced back streamed out one after one, vanishing as they poured down my cheeks.

It was the second time I had cried since I came to this world. From the time I panicked and cried on the day I first logged in, I convinced myself that I would cry again no more. I thought that I did not need these tears, forcibly flowing down due to the emotion expression system. But I have never felt tears more feverish, more painful than the ones running down my cheeks right now, not even those that flowed in the real world.

When I was talking with Asuna, there was one thing that never managed to get out. "I like that person too," these words almost came out countless times. However, there was no way I could say them.

At the workshop, the instant I saw Kirito and Asuna turn to talk to each other, I understood that there was no place for me beside Kirito. That is because— On that snowy mountain, I had exposed Kirito's life to danger. No one can stand beside that person, aside from one who possesses that same stout heart. That's right... Like for example, someone like Asuna...

The two were connected by a powerful pulling force, much like the pairing between a meticulously made sword and sheath. That was what I felt strongly. And beyond all else, Asuna had been constantly thinking about Kirito for countless months, and with the hard work she put in to narrow the

gap between them bit by bit, day after day, there was no way I could just do something like thrust myself into that relationship all of a sudden.

That's right... I had known Kirito for no more than a single full day. Going on an adventure I was unused to with an unfamiliar person, my heart must have been just surprised by that. It wasn't the truth. These weren't my true feelings. If I were to fall in love, I wouldn't hurry; slowly thinking about it— I should have always, always thought of it as that.

But still, just why were these tears still flowing out?

Kirito's voice, his actions, all of those expressions he had shown in those twenty-four hours floated by before my shut eyelids one after another. The sensations of him brushing my hair, taking hold of my arm, his hand grasping mine. His warmth, the heat from that beating heart— As these seething recollections passed through me, a sharp pain resounded deep within my chest.

Forget it. It's all a dream. Wash it all away with these tears.

Holding tightly on the trunk of a tree by the side of the road, I cried. Looking downwards while stifling my voice, I continued crying. These tears would have dried up sooner or later in the real world, but it seems that these scalding liquids overflowing from my eyes had no intention to ever stop flowing.

And— from behind me, that voice came.

"Lisbeth."

My entire body trembled with a start as my name was called out. That tender, gentle voice, still left with echoes of its original boyish tone.

It must be a dream. There was no way he could be here. Thinking that, I turned my face upwards, without even bothering to wipe my tears away.

Kirito stood there. The eyes within those black forelocks, showing an ache from a grief unique to him, looked at me. I briefly glanced back at those eyes, and soon murmured with a quaver in my voice.

"...That's no good, coming here right now. I would have returned to the usual energetic Lisbeth in just a little more too."

"..."

Kirito silently took a step forward; he tried to reach out with his right hand. I shook my head lightly, stopping him.

"...How did you find this place?"

Upon hearing that, Kirito pondered, and pointed towards the middle of the town.

"From over there..."

At the point of that finger, far off from here, the spire of the church, built opposing the gate plaza, jutted up above the ripples of buildings.

"I gazed throughout the town, and found you."

"He, he."

My tears silently continued streaming down as before, but after listening to Kirito's answer, a smile floated to my mouth.

"You're as ridiculous as always, huh?"

Even that part of him... I liked that. To a hopeless extent.

I felt yet another surge of sobbing welling up within myself. I frantically held it down.

"Sorry, I'm... fine, you see. Hurry up and get back to Asuna already."

The moment I managed to say and was about to turn around, Kirito continued his words.

"I—I wanted to give thanks to Liz."

"Eh...?"

Befuddled by the unexpected remark, I stared at his face.

"...I, in the past, there was a time when my guild members were annihilated... With that, I decided never again, to ever get close to others."

Kirito gave a fleeting frown, chewing on his lips.

"That's why, usually, I avoid forming a party with anyone at all. However, yesterday, the moment Liz invited me to do that quest, it went fine for some reason. I kept thinking it was strange throughout the day. Just why was I walking alongside this person..."

I forgot the pain in my chest for an instant, taking a look at Kirito.

That means— That means, I was...

"Until now, no matter who asked, I rejected all of them. When those I knew... No, even for those whose names I didn't even know, just by watching others battle, I just froze in fear. I couldn't help but want to just run away. That's pretty much why I had always secluded myself at the foremost of the foremost of the frontlines, where people rarely came. —When we fell in that hole, I even thought that it would be better to die together than be the one left behind; that is definitely not a lie."

He showed a faint smile. It felt like a boundless amount of self-condemnation laid deep within that, taking my breath away.

"But you lived. It was unexpected, but the fact that I was able to live on with Liz made me really glad. And, that night... When you gave me your hand, everything was laid bare. Liz's hand was warm... This person is still alive, that was what I thought. I, and everyone one else as well, we definitely don't exist just for the sake of welcoming death someday; I believe we live for the sake of living on. So... Thanks, Liz."

"..."

This time, a true smile rose up from deep within my heart. Driven by a mysterious strong emotion, I opened my mouth.

"I was the same... I was the same; I have always been searching for that. For a special something true, in this world. To me, that was the warmth from your hand."

All of a sudden, that thorn of ice pierced deep within my heart gently melted away, that was similar to what it felt like. My tears had also ceased some time ago. For a short period of time, we stared at each other in silence. That sensation that appeared during the time we fled made its entrance once again, brushing against my heart for a mere instant, and vanished.

I was rewarded. That was what I believed.

The words from Kirito just then engulfed the broken fragments of my love that had cracked apart, and I felt them sinking down somewhere deep inside.

I swiftly blinked my eyes once, shaking off small drops, and opened my mouth to speak with a smile.

"Those words earlier, be sure to let Asuna hear them too. That girl is suffering too. She wants Kirito's warmth, after all."

"Liz..."

"I'm fine."

I nodded softly, holding onto my chest with my hands.

"This fever will remain for just a little longer. So... Please, Kirito, end this world. I'll be sure to work hard until then. But, when we return to the real world..."

I grinned with an impish smile.

"We'll go right into round two with that."

"..."

Kirito smiled as well, giving a deep nod. Next, he swung his left hand, opening a window. Just as I wondered what he was up to, the «Elucidator» was removed from his back, stored into the inventory. Following that, he manipulated his equipment figure, materializing a new sword in its place. «Dark Repulser», the white sword filled with my emotions.

"From today onwards, this sword will be my partner. The bill will... be settled for in the other world."

"Oh, now you've gone and said it. It'll come at quite a cost."

As we shared laughter, we bumped our right fists against each other.

"Well, let's get back to the store. Asuna must be tired of waiting... And I'm getting hungry too, anyway."

I said that, and began to walk after getting up in front of Kirito. For one final time, I firmly wiped my eyes, scattering the last of the tears still in the corners of my eyes, and they vanished into beads of light.

## Part 4

The cold was noticeably harsher today,

I entered my workshop while rubbing my hands together. Pulling the lever on the wall, I warmed my hands over the furnace that had immediately ignited, burning red hot. The thudding sound of the waterwheel remained the same at least, but the early winter right now was already this cold. If midwinter were to come and the small river at the back freezes over, I was worried over just what would happen to me.

I thought hard for a short while before coming to my senses with a start, and consulted my scheduler. There were still eight items piled up in the list of orders due today. The day will soon come to an end if I don't hurry and settle them.

The first order was a lightweight-type one-handed straight sword. I peered through my list of ingots, picking out one that was a good compromise between budget and performance shortly after, and tossed it into the furnace.

At this point in time, my mastery of the hammer had increased, and I even got my hands on some new metals, so I have been able to constantly hit up high leveled weapons. Selecting a time when the fire has heated to a suitable temperature, I placed the ingot onto the anvil. Setting up the hammer, I swung it down with great vigor.

But, when speaking about one-handed straight swords— Not a single sword was able to exceed that particular sword I forged back in the summer of this year. That fact is frustrating, and at the same time, a relief.

That sword that had buried the fragments of my heart was probably spiritedly rampaging through the faraway frontlines yet again today. Although I do tend to it on this very whetstone before my eyes every now and then, unlike normal weapons, the transparency of its blade seemed to increase with use. For some reason, it seemed unlike the numerical consumables that run out sooner or later; it felt more like it would break apart once its duty had been completed— that was what I predicted.

But well, that was probably still a future that wouldn't be here anytime soon. The frontlines were now on the seventy-fifth floor. That sword would still have to work on for longer still. Within the right hand of that person— Kirito's.

When I noticed, it seemed that I had already finished hitting it for the required number of times; the ingot started to change its shape as it shone with red light. I watched this magical instant pass with my breath held, and picked up the sword that soon appeared to examine it.

"...Average, I guess."

Murmuring so, I placed that onto the worktable. Without delay, I started picking out the next ingot. This time was a two-handed axe, with the focus on its reach...

A time long after the start of noon, I somehow managed to finish off all of the orders, and stood up. Moving my head around in circles, I stretched my body vigorously. As I took a breath of relief, a small photo hanging on the wall entered my vision.

Making peace signs while joined together, Asuna and me. Beside Asuna, standing half a step below, Kirito with a wry smile. It was taken in front of this building. Around half a month ago— when the news of the two's marriage came in.

No matter who you might ask, those two certainly suit each other, but getting to that goal eventually took an entire half a year. I was getting impatient, and tried to poke my nose into their relationship in various ways, and when I was finally informed of the news of their marriage in the end, I was really happy for them. But still— I felt just the slightest, heartrending ache.

I still see what happened on that night in my dreams. Recollecting that single dreamlike night that shone like a modest gem within these two years with barely any ups-and-downs. Even right now, after three months had already passed, it still warmed my heart like glowing embers.

"...Even so..."

It certainly was amazing, I murmured thus in my heart, and softly traced the photo with my finger. Even though I consider myself to be a rational realist, to think that I had such an unreserved disposition was something that I didn't even notice at all.

"I had always loved you, until the very end."

Giving a firm tap onto a certain spot on the photo, I shifted my thoughts. Wondering if I should make a simple meal for my late lunch, or perhaps eat

out for the first time in a while, I stepped out of my workshop— it happened then.

A sound effect that I had never heard till now resounded loudly from above. \*Ding\*, \*ding\*, a sound resembling a bell alarm... I immediately gazed at the ceiling, but it seemed that the sound was coming from even higher, reverberating from the direction of the upper floors.

I was just about to run out hurriedly, when something that surprised me even further happened. Although the reason behind it was obvious, the store-tending NPC, who stood at the counter, not needing a single day of rest since the opening of the store, suddenly vanished without even a single sound.

"...!?"

I blinked my eyes, and stared at the space where the girl stood till earlier, but there was no sign of her return. The situation was getting more and more convoluted.

To me, who stumbled my way out, an even more astonishing experience caused me to stand stock still.

On the bottom of the upper floor that spread out, a hundred meters above, right before that barren grey roof—gigantic red letters were suspended, spaced tightly together. I stared absorbed at them; the two English lines, "Warning", and, "System Announcement", were arranged on a checkered pattern.

"System... Announcement..."

It was a scene I had seen before. There was no way I could have forgotten it. Two years ago, on that day this death game started, the exact same spectacle appeared behind that hollow avatar that announced the change of rules to the ten thousand players.

Finally looking around my surroundings after being frozen to that for several full seconds, I spotted many other players, looking up at the upper floor while standing straight up, just like me. Frowning as I felt something off about this scene, the reason instantly came to mind.

Usually, while walking through the streets, there would be NPCs hawking their wares; not a single one was around. I believe they probably

disappeared at the same time as the one tending to my store did, but... just why—

All of a sudden, the ringing alarm sound stopped. After a moment of silence, this time, what came down was a tender female voice, in that same loud volume.

[We will now be announcing an urgent notice to all of the players.]

It was completely different from the voice of the Game Master, Kayaba Akihiko, from two years ago, being an artificial synthetic voice with the sounds of electronic noise mixed in. It was obviously an announcement made through the game system, but with barely any presence of the management in SAO, this was the first time I had heard of an announcement done via these means. I strained my ears to listen while holding my breath.

[The game will now be entering forced administration mode. All monsters and item spawns will be suspended. All NPCs will be dismissed. The hit points of all players will be fixed to their maximum amount.]

A system error? Did some fatal bug appear...?

That was what I thought for an instant. My heart was gripped with unease. But in the next moment—

[Aincrad Standard Time, November the seventh, fourteen-fifty-five, the game has been cleared.]

—And the system voice reported thus.

The game, has been cleared?

I could not understand the meaning of those words for several seconds. The other players around too, stood still with their expressions frozen. However, upon hearing the line it led to, all of them sprung up.

[All players will be logged out in sequence. Kindly wait at your current location. I repeat...]

Suddenly, "Wooah!", and such huge cheers of joy erupted. The ground, no, the whole of the Floating Castle Aincrad trembled. Everyone was hugging each other, rolling about the ground, shouting out loud with their hands raised towards the sky.

I didn't move, didn't say a word, simply standing in front of my store. I somehow managed to lift up my hands, and covered my mouth.

So he did it. He— Kirito did it. With his usual recklessness...

That was what I believed. After all, the foremost frontlines were still at the seventy-fifth floor, but with the game cleared like this, this absurd, thoughtless, act of foolhardiness was definitely Kirito's deed.

I felt like I heard soft murmurs close to my ears.

—I, kept my word...

"Yeah... Yeah... Finally, you did it..."

With that, hot tears spilled from my eyes. Without bothering to wipe them away, I thrust my right hand up with all my might, jumping up and down without stop.

"O—Oh!!!"

Cupping my hands to my mouth, so as to reach him, who should be on the upper floors far away, I cried out as loud as I could.

"We will, definitely meet again, Kirito—!! ...I love you!!!"

(End)

# Morning Dew Girl (Aincrad 22nd Floor, October 2024)

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## Part 1

Asuna has always set her morning alarm to seven-fifty.

If you were to ask why it's at such a vague time, it's because Kirito's morning alarm goes off right at eight. Waking up ten minutes beforehand and looking at him, asleep beside her while she's still in bed, is a hobby of hers.

This morning, Asuna once again woke up to the mellow sound of woodwind instruments and continued lying down, gazing at Kirito's sleeping face while resting her head on her hands.

She fell in love half a year ago. They became clearing partners two weeks ago. And only a mere six days had passed since they got married and moved here, within the forest of the twenty-second floor. Despite being her most beloved, she was certainly still in the dark about many things related to Kirito. For one, as she peered over his sleeping face, she gradually became less sure of his age.

Just a while back, due to his uncaring and aloof nature, she had figured that he should be a little older than her. However, the sight of Kirito, deep in sleep, extruded such naive innocence, that he could only look like a young boy, no older than her.

Asking for something like his age probably— would not be a problem. However, breaching into affairs of the real world was frowned upon, and besides, the two of them were already husband and wife. Rather than age, to meet again after returning to the real world, exchanging information from actual names and addresses to contact details, would be much more reliable.

However, Asuna was not quite able to bring herself to say that out loud.

She was afraid that after speaking of matters from the real world, this «married life» would feel like nothing more than a flimsy figment of her imagination. To the current Asuna, her single, most important reality, were these gentle days in this forested home; even if it became impossible to escape from this world, with their actual bodies welcoming death, she would still be satisfied, being able to continue living this way till the very end, passing on without regrets.

That was why she would not wake up from this dream just yet— Thinking so, Asuna softly stretched out her hand and caressed the sleeping Kirito's face.

Even so, it sure was a childish sleeping face.

There was certainly no need to doubt Kirito's strength at that moment. The extraordinary amount of experience accumulated from playing through the beta test period, as well as the numerical stats acquired through continuous fighting, and to use those effectively, his judgment and determination. He might have lost to the leader of the Knights of the Blood, «Holy Sword» Heathcliff, but Kirito was the strongest player that Asuna knew of. Regardless of how grim the battlefield may get, she would never feel nervous with him by her side.

However, as she gazed at the curled up Kirito lying down, somehow, the feeling that he was just like a naive and fragile little brother boiled up within her, struggling to burst out from her chest. The feeling that she must protect him.

Gently breathing, Asuna leaned over, covering Kirito's body with her arm. She softly whispered.

"Kirito-kun... I love you. Stay with me forever, alright?"

At that moment, Kirito trembled lightly, slowly opening his eyelids. The couple exchanged glances, with their faces right before each other.

"Waa!!"

Asuna pulled back frantically. Shifting to a kneeling posture on the bed, she spoke as her face blushed scarlet.

"Go-Good morning, Kirito-kun. ...Did you... hear that just now...?"

"Good morning. Just now... eh, did something happen?"

Facing the Kirito, who rose up and replied while stifling a yawn, Asuna wildly flailed her hands around.

"N-No, nothing happened!"

Finishing a breakfast of sunny-side-up eggs with rye bread, salad, and coffee and tidying up the table in a couple of seconds, Asuna clapped her hands together.

"Well! Where shall we play today?"

"Oh, you."

And Kirito gave a wry smile.

"Don't talk about something like that so bluntly,"

"But everyday has been so much fun, you know."

These were Asuna's real and pure thoughts.

Just thinking back brought out painful memories, but during the one and a half years, from the time she became a prisoner of SAO to when she fell in love with Kirito, Asuna had forged and hardened her heart.

Sacrificing sleep to strengthen her skill levels, being chosen as the sub-leader of the clearing guild, Knights of the Blood, she had plunged into the labyrinths at a pace fast enough to cause even members to give up at times.

All that was in her heart was solely to clear the game and escape; thus, she concluded that all other activities unrelated to that cause were useless.

With these thoughts running through her mind, Asuna could not help but regret not being able to chance upon Kirito earlier. The days after meeting him were so vibrant, so filled with surprises that they surpassed even her previous life in the real world. If it was with him, the time spent here could all be considered rare experiences.

That was why to Asuna, finally being able to get a day where both of them could pass time together, each and every second could be thought of as a precious jewel in itself. She wanted to go, as a couple, to more and more places together and talk about many different topics.

Asuna placed her hands on her waist and spoke while pouting.

"Then doesn't Kirito-kun want to go somewhere and play?"

In response to that, Kirito grinned broadly and waved his left hand, calling out a map. Switching it to its visible mode, he presented it to Asuna. The floor's arrangement of forests and lakes were displayed on it.

"Right about here."

What was pointed out was a corner of a forest, not too far away from their home.

Being one of the lower floors, the twenty-second floor was naturally quite wide. The diameter of the entire area was possibly over eight kilometers long. A humongous lake existed in the middle and to the southern coast lay the main town, «Coral» Village. On the northern coast was the labyrinth. The rest of the area was covered by a beautiful coniferous forest. The little home belonging to Asuna and Kirito was in an area on the southern edge of the floor, and what Kirito was currently pointing to was to the north-east, roughly two kilometers away.

"Well, it's about a rumor I heard about in the village yesterday... In this part, where the forest thickens... "It" seems to come out."

"Hah?"

To the subtly smiling Kirito, Asuna doubtfully responded.

"What does?"

"...A ghost."

Rendered speechless for a moment, she timidly asked.

"...That means, a monster of the Astral type? Something like a wraith or a banshee?"

"Nope, it's the real thing. A player... that is, a human spirit. Apparently a female."

"Aah..."

Asuna involuntarily winced. Towards topics like this, Asuna was confident only of being affected worse than the average person. She was bad enough with them to think up random reasons to ditch the clearing of the old castle labyrinth, stretched over the sixty-fifth and sixty-sixth floors, renowned for its horror theme.

"B-But you see, this is the virtual world of a game. Something like— a ghost coming out, something like that could never happen."

Forcing herself to keep her smile, she started protesting vehemently.

"Just how true is that, I wonder..."

But Kirito, who knew that Asuna was weak against ghosts, enthusiastically went on the offense.

"For example... A player who died with unfulfilled regrets, possessing the Nerve Gear still attached and switched on... wandering through the field, night after night..."

"Stop th—!"

"Wahaha, sorry about that, it was just a bad joke. Well, I doubt that a spirit will really appear, but if we're going somewhere, it's best to head for a place with a higher chance of something interesting happening, right?"

"Aaah..."

Curling her lips into a pout, Asuna shifted her focus outside the window.

Despite winter soon approaching, the weather sure was fine. The sunlight seemed warm and gentle, pouring down onto the garden's lawn. A time most unsuitable for events such as the appearance of a ghost. Due to how Aincrad was structured, although it was impossible to see the sun directly except during early morning and evening, thanks to the adequate ambient lighting, the field was vividly lit up.

Asuna turned back towards Kirito and replied, with her head held up high.

"Alright, let's go. To prove that there's no way something like a ghost could actually exist."

"And that's that. —If we don't find it today, we'll go in the middle of the night next time, yeah?"

"No way!! ...I won't be making any food for a bully like that."

"Gah, scratch that. You didn't hear anything."

Giving Kirito one final scowl, Asuna broke into a grin and laughed.

"Well, let's finish up the preparations. I'll be grilling the fish, so Kirito-kun, cut the bread, okay?"

Quickly stuffing a lunch box with fish burgers, it was nine o'clock in the morning when they left the house.

Stepping onto the lawn in the garden, Asuna turned back to Kirito and spoke.

"Hey, let me ride on your shoulders."

"Let you ride on my shoulders!?"

Kirito replied wildly, returning the question.

"You see, always looking from the same height gets boring. It should be a piece of cake with Kirito-kun's physical strength stat, right?"

"Well, that might be true... Geez, just how old are you..."

"Age doesn't have anything to do with it! Isn't it fine? It's not like anyone is watching."

"Al-Alright, I guess.."

Astounded, Kirito squatted down and turned his back towards Asuna while shaking his head. Raising her skirt, she lifted her legs onto his shoulders.

"There we go. But I'll be sure to hit you if you look back, alright."

"Aren't you being unreasonable...?"

Grumbling about the situation, Kirito nimbly rose, resulting in an instant rise in the point of view.

"Waa! Look, you can even see the lake from here!"

"I can't see it!!"

"Then I'll do it for you later too."

"..."

Placing her hands on Kirito's head, who was slumped over with exhaustion over the current events, Asuna spoke.

"Now, it's time to depart! Set a course, north by north-east!"

Laughing cheerfully aboard the shoulders of Kirito, who was steadily walking forward, Asuna was able to grasp how precious these days were, being able to live together. She could wholeheartedly believe that this was the time she had felt most «alive» in all the seventeen years of her life.

Strolling along the path— well, Kirito was the only one who was actually put in effort, but— After about ten minutes, one of the numerous lakes

dotting the twenty-second floor finally came into view. Perhaps tempted by the gentle weather, there were already several players who were there since morning, casting into the lake, lures dangling in the water. The path curled around the lake, heading uphill, quite a distance away from the lake shore. But as they approached, players who noticed turned towards them and waved. It seemed that everyone they saw smiled at them and some were even laughing aloud.

"...This isn't like no one's watching at all!!"

"Ahaha, so there were people around... Hey, Kirito-kun, wave back at them too."

"There's no way I'll do that."

Despite his complaints, Kirito showed no sign of wanting to let Asuna down. Asuna understood that he was actually amused by the turn of events.

The path soon sloped downwards, towards the right, heading into the deep forest. Weaving through the space between the enormous coniferous trees resembling cedar, towering over all else, they strolled on lightly. The rustling of leaves, the murmuring of a small stream, the chirping of small birds. All of these sounds served as a complement for the forest scenery, dyed in the colors of autumn.

Asuna turned her eyes towards the treetops, which were closer to her than usually.

"The tree sure is big... Hey, do you think you can climb it...?"

"Hm... Mm..."

In response to Asuna's query, Kirito thought about it for a while.

"It's probably within the limits of the system... Want to give it a try?"

"Nah, let's leave that to next time. —Now that I think about climbing."

Asuna stretched her body while mounted on Kirito's shoulders and looked towards the outer edge of Aincrad, through the gaps between the trees.

"Those things around the edge, the ones that look like supports, they are connected all the way to the next floor, right? I wonder... just what would happen if we climbed up those?"

"Ah, I tried that before."

"Eeh!?"

Bending her body, she turned and peered at Kirito.

"Why didn't you invite me too."

"Well, it was from when we didn't know each other that well yet."

"What, that's just because Kirito-kun kept running away."

"...D-Did I really do that?"

"That's right. I always tried inviting you, but you weren't even willing to accompany me for tea."

"Th-That's... We-Well, putting that aside."

Steering the conversation that had started taking a strange turn back onto the original topic, Kirito continued.

"If you were to judge based purely on the results, it was a failure. Climbing from the parts where the rocks were more rugged was surprisingly easy, but after climbing for around eighty meters, an error message came out, going all, 'You can't go beyond this area' and pissing me off."

"Ah ha ha, so as expected, cheating doesn't work, huh."

"It's not a laughing matter. My hands slipped from the shock and I fell magnificently..."

"E-Eh!? Wouldn't you usually die from something like that?"

"Yeah. I thought I was doomed. If I was another three seconds late with that Teleport Crystal, I would have become a new recruit on the list of players killed in action."

"Geez, that was dangerous. Make sure you don't repeat it, alright?"

"That's what I wanted to say!"

Strolling while exchanging their aimless conversation, the forest gradually became more dense. Even the cries of the elusive birds around, as well as the sunlight, leaking through the treetops began to fade away.

As Asuna glanced around once again, she questioned Kirito.

"Hey, that... place in that rumour, just which way is it?"

"Well, it's..."

Kirito waved his hand, checking their bearings on the map.

"Ah, we're pretty close by. We'll reach it in a few minutes."

"Hmm... Hey, about this case, were there any details on it?"

She didn't really want to hear about it, but not knowing anything made her just as uneasy, prompting her to ask.

"Well, about a week back, a woodworking craftsman (woodcraft) player seemed to have come around here to gather some logs. The lumber that can be harvested from this forest are of fairly good quality, and while the player was engrossed in the task, it grew dark... The player hurried to return, but covered by the shade of the trees... there was a fleeting sight of white."

"..."

This was already the limit for Asuna, but Kirito mercilessly continued.

"The player got flustered thinking that it was a monster, but apparently, that wasn't it. It was a human, or rather, a little girl, as the player had mentioned. Long, black hair on white garments. Slowly walking towards a grove of trees. If it wasn't a monster, it could only be a player, the player thought, gazing at her."

"..."

"—There wasn't a cursor."

"Ee..."

A soft cry unintentionally leaked out from her throat.

"There's no way that's possible. Despite thinking that, the player got closer. And even called out to her. Doing so, the girl ceased all movement... she gradually turned around towards him..."

"Th-Th-That's e-eno..."

"Then, the man finally noticed. The girl, as the moonlight shone down onto her white clothes, the trees next to her— could be seen right through her."

"——!!"

Stifling a scream, Asuna gripped onto Kirito's hair tightly.

"It's the end of me if she turns around, he thought and ran away. Finally getting away far enough to spot the light from the village, he figured that he was safe and stopped... wheezing, he turned to look behind..."

"——h!?"

"And there wasn't anyone there. And he lived happily ever after."

"...Ki-Ki-Kirito-kun, you idiot——!!"

Jumping down from his shoulders, she raised her fist, seriously getting ready to let loose a punch at his back— at that very moment.

Deep within the depths of the forest, gloomy, despite it still being midday, at a distance from the pair, something white peeked at them from the side of the trunk of a coniferous tree.

Assaulted by an ominous aura, Asuna became frozen with fear. Even if it was not as much as Kirito's, Asuna's perception skills too, were rather refined through experience. Passively toggling the usage of the skill on, she could improve the clarity of whatever she focuses on.

Something white appeared to be fluttering in the wind. It was not a plant. Nor a rock. But cloth. Or to put it in detail, it was a one piece dress with distinct lines. Peeking out from the hem were two slender, long— legs.

The girl stood still. Almost as Kirito had described, she was a young girl clothed in a white one piece dress, unmoving, silently staring at the couple.

Feeling faint as her consciousness leaked away, Asuna somewhat managed to open her mouth. She let out a raspy whisper.

"Ki... Kirito-kun, over there."

Kirito quickly followed Asuna's gaze. Immediately, he too, froze up.

"Th-This has gotta be a lie..."

The girl did not move. Standing roughly ten meters away from the pair, her gaze was fixed on them. At that very moment, Asuna braced herself, thinking that she would definitely faint if the girl came any closer.

The girl's body swayed— unsteadily. Like a mechanical doll that had run out of energy, she tumbled to the ground, with a motion unlike that of a living being. A light thud gently resonated out.

"There's..."

At that instant, Kirito narrowed his eyes.

"No way something like that's a ghost!!!"

And ran as he yelled out.

"Wa-Wait up, Kirito-kun!"

Despite the pleas to stop from Asuna who was left behind, Kirito rushed towards the fallen girl, without even looking back.

"Geez!!"

Asuna reluctantly stood up and chased after him. Despite her heart still trembling, she had never heard of a ghost that could faint and fall over. That could not be anything but a player.

Late by several seconds, upon reaching the shade under the coniferous tree, she found the girl already cradled within Kirito's arms. She was still unconscious. Her eyes, shaded by long eyelashes, were still closed, with her arms feebly hanging straight down. Gazing earnestly over her figure, wrapped in the one piece dress, Asuna reconfirmed that it was not translucent in any way.



"Is she alright?"

"Hmm..."

Kirito spoke, peering into the girl's face.

"Well, to be frank... There's no need for breathing in this world, neither do hearts beat..."

Within SAO, most human physiological functions can be reproduced, but are omitted. It is possible to deliberately take a breath, along with the sensation of air flowing through your respiratory tract, but the avatars have no need to breathe subconsciously and will not do so. Likewise, for the beating of the heart, despite the sensation of it beating harder through tension or excitement, there was no way to feel that of others.

"But still, she's not vanishing... so she should still be alive, I guess. But this... certainly is strange..."

Finishing his comment, Kirito tilted his head to the side.

"What's strange?"

"She can't be a ghost, seeing as I can touch her like this. But still, the cursor... isn't coming out..."

"Ah..."

Asuna once again concentrated her vision on the girl's form. However, the color cursor that would definitely appear when dynamic objects in Aincrad, such as players, monsters, or even NPCs, were targeted, did not in this case. It was a phenomenon that had never happened until now.

"Is it perhaps, a bug, or something like that?"

"That's probably it. In a situation like this, one would usually call for a GM in a usual net-game, but there aren't any GMs in SAO... But still, it's not just the cursor. For a player, she looks way too young."

That was true. The body supported by Kirito's hands was unusually small. She did not even seem to be beyond ten years of age. There was supposed to be an age restriction while setting up the Nerve Gear, before being able to sign up, forbidding children, probably below the age of thirteen, from being able to use it.

Asuna softly stretched out her hand, brushing over the girl's forehead. It felt mildly cool and smooth to the touch.

"Why is... there a girl, as young as this, in SAO...?"

Firmly biting his lips, Kirito spoke as he rose up.

"For the time being, we can't just leave her alone. We should be able to find something out when she wakes up. Let's bring her back with us."

"Yeah, that's right."

Kirito got up as he held the girl in his arms. Asuna casually glanced over the surroundings, but being unable to find anything aside from a large, rotting stump, she did not manage to find out the reason for the girl's presence in the area.

They dashed nearly the entire way, but the girl did not regain consciousness, even after they exited the forest and arrived back home. Laying the girl down on Asuna's bed and setting a blanket, the pair sat down, side by side, on the adjacent bed, belonging to Kirito.

There was a momentary stillness in the air, before Kirito nonchalantly broke the silence.

"Well, if there's one thing we can be sure of, it's that she's not an NPC since we managed to move her in here."

"Yeah... that's right."

NPCs under the control of the system have their positions fixed within certain ranges of coordinates and, thus, cannot be moved according to players' desires. If they were to try touching or holding them, the harassment report window would be triggered within seconds, giving them a painful shock and blowing them away.

Lightly nodding to Asuna's agreement, Kirito continued with his deductions.

"Also, it couldn't be the opening to some kind of quest. If that was the case, the quest window should have refreshed the moment we touched her. ...In other words, this kid must be a player, who lost her way... or at least, that should be the most reasonable conclusion."

Quickly shifting his gaze towards the bed, he continued.

"Not having a crystal on hand, perhaps not even aware of the methods of getting around, I believe she had never ventured out to the field, and only stayed within the «Starting City». I don't know why she came all the way to a place like this, but in the Starting City, we might find someone who knows her... maybe even her parents or guardians might be there."

"Yeah. I think so too. I don't believe a child as young as this could even get on by herself. She should have come with her family or someone like that... I really do hope, that they're safe though."

Apparently having struggled with that last line, Asuna turned and faced Kirito.

"Hey, she should recover, right?"

"Ah. If she's not disappearing yet, she should still be hooked up to the Nerve Gear. Her condition should be close to sleep. That's why, sooner or later, she will wake up... I believe."

Vigorously nodding his head, Kirito's words were tinged with hope.

As Asuna got up, she knelt before the bed on which the girl was asleep, and reached out with her right hand. She gently caressed the girl's head.

She certainly was a beautiful girl. Rather than a human child, her presence could be said to be closer to that of a fairy. Her complexion was similar to the composition of alabaster, delicate and snow white. Her long, black hair gleamed elegantly, and with her exotic-looking features, she would, without a doubt, be charming if she were to open her eyes and smile.

Kirito got closer as well, lowering his body beside Asuna. Hesitantly reaching out his right hand, he stroked the girl's hair.

"She doesn't seem to be ten... Perhaps around eight?"

"It should be around there... She's the youngest player I've ever met."

"That's right. I came across a female beast tamer before, but even she was around thirteen years old."

Instinctively reacting to something she had never heard about, Asuna stared at Kirito.

"Hmm, so you had a cute friend like that, huh."

"Ah, we just exchange mails every now and then... n-no, that's all, there's nothing else to it!"

"I wonder. Kirito-kun is dull, after all."

And she turned away sharply.

As though he sensed the conversation heading towards an odd direction, Kirito stood up and spoke.

"Ah, it's already this late. Let's have some lunch."

"About that story, I'll be sure to have you clearly explain all the details later on, okay."

Glaring at Kirito once again, Asuna got up as well, laughing as she decided to drop the matter for the time being.

"Well, let's have the packed lunch. I'll go and make some tea."

The late autumn afternoon passed away peacefully, and even as the time for the crimson light, flooding in from the sun on the outer edge, to fade away came by, the girl still did not stir from her sleep.

As the curtains were drawn closed and the lamp on the wall lit, Kirito happened to return from his trip to the village. Silently shaking his head, he conveyed the failure on finding any leads on the girl.

Not in the best of moods for enjoying a lively dinner, the pair opted for a simple meal of soup and bread, and Kirito began his endeavor after looking over the various types of newspaper he had bought.

Although it is referred to as a newspaper, it is unlike those of the real world, pieces of paper bound together, but instead, simply a single piece of parchment, with the size similar to that of a magazine. It is represented in a manner like that of the system window screen, and by editing it like a website, it can be used to organize and display information gathered.

The contents too, are identical to a game walkthrough site managed by players, comprising of many topics: news, a beginner's manual, FAQs, an item list, etc. Within those, there was also a Lost & Found / Q&A section, where the pair laid their eyes on. They thought there was a possibility of someone searching for a girl. However—

"...None, eh..."

"None, huh..."

Spending tens of minutes to go through the entire newspaper, the two exchanged glances and loosened the tension in their shoulders. There was nothing more they could do than to wait for the girl to finally awaken and explain the circumstances.

On a normal night, the two of them would stay up late having meaningless conversations, playing simple games, sometimes even taking an evening stroll, or countless other activities that they do more rarely, but neither of them were in the mood for those this night.

"Let's call it a day already."

"Hm. I guess so."

Asuna acknowledged Kirito's words with a nod.

Turning the lights in the living room off, they headed into the bedroom. As the girl was occupying one of the beds, one of them would have to sleep with the other —well, that was already the case every other night, but— and they changed into their sleepwear in a hurry.

The lamp in the bedroom was also doused, and the pair laid down on the bed.

Kirito certainly did possess several strange unique skills; but still, it seemed that sleeping easily and well was included amongst them. When Asuna felt in the mood to talk and turned over, there was already the steady sound of breathing during sleep.

"Geez."

Softly muttering her disapproval, she flipped to the other side, facing the bed on which the girl was asleep. In the pale blue darkness, the black-haired girl was still fast asleep as before. Although she had never made a conscious effort to think about the girl's past, her thoughts gradually drifted in that direction as she continued staring.

If she was living until now with a guardian, like her parents or siblings, that would be fine. However, in the case that she came into this world alone and spent these two years in fear and isolation— to a mere eight or nine year old child, those days must have been unbearable. If she was in that situation, she would probably be unable to retain her sanity.

Could it be— Asuna leapt towards the worst possible conclusion. Maybe, the reason why she was wandering in that forest and faded into unconsciousness was due to some problem caused by the condition of her mind. Of course, there are no psychiatrists in Aincrad; neither were there any system administrators to seek aid from. The most optimistic prediction for clearing the game was still half a year at least, and nothing could be accomplished with merely Asuna and Kirito's effort anyway. Due to the fact that they were both currently absent from the frontlines, the number of players at their levels would be reduced by two, and creating a balanced party would be more difficult as well.

Regardless of how deeply the girl was suffering, she did not have the ability to save her— Realizing that, Asuna was stricken with an agonizing pain in her chest. She unconsciously left the bed and moved to the side of the sleeping girl.

Brushing the girl's hair for a short moment, Asuna softly turned back the covers and lay down beside her. With both arms, she tightly embraced her small body. Although the girl did not move even a single inch, her expression seemed to soften, and Asuna quietly whispered.

"Goodnight. It would be nice, if you woke up tomorrow..."

## Part 2

Bathed in the white morning light, a gentle tune flowed into Asuna's drowsy consciousness. It was her wake-up alarm with the sound of an oboe playing. Enshrouded in the drifting sensation on the edge of awakening, Asuna plunged herself into the melody, somehow filled with nostalgia. Before long, the refreshing echoes of string instruments and the leading rhythm from the clarinet flowed over each other, along with a faint humming voice—

—Humming?

She was not the one singing. Asuna snapped her eyes open.

Within her arms, the black-haired girl had her eyelids closed... Humming along to the melody of Asuna's wake-up alarm.

The girl did not miss even a single beat. However, that was impossible. As Asuna had set the alarm to be audible to only herself, there was no chance that anyone could achieve a feat like singing along to the melody within her mind.

In any case, Asuna decided to put aside that doubt for now. Rather than that—

"Ki-Kirito-kun, geez, Kirito-kun!!"

Not moving an inch, she called to Kirito, sleeping in the bed behind. There were soon signs of Kirito softly murmuring as he awoke.

"...Morning. Something happened?"

"Hurry, come over here!"

The hushed creaking of the floorboards. Shifting his gaze over Asuna, onto the bed, Kirito widened his eyes immediately as well.

"She's singing...!?"

"Y-Yeah..."

Asuna lightly shook the girl within her hands and called out.

"Hey, wake up... Open up, your eyes."

The girl stopped moving her lips. Soon, her long eyelashes weakly trembled, and slowly rose upwards.

With misty black eyes, she peered directly into Asuna's eyes, right before her. Blinking several times, she opened her almost colorless lips just the tiniest bit.

"Aa... uu..."

The girl's voice rang out, like the delicate vibrations of silverware, a fleetingly beautiful sound. Asuna sat up, still holding onto the girl.

"...Thank goodness, you woke up. Do you know anything about, well, what happened to you?"

When spoken to, the girl kept her silence for several seconds, shaking her head in small, short motions.

"I see... What's your name? Can you say it?"

"N...ame... M...y... name... "

As the girl inclined her head, a strand of her glossy, black hair fell onto her cheek.

"Yu...i. Yui. That is... name..."

"So, Yui-chan? That's a pretty name. I'm Asuna. And that person is Kirito."

As Asuna turned, the girl who called herself Yui followed suit and shifted her vision. Looking to and fro between Asuna and Kirito, who was half bent forward, she opened her mouth.

"A...una. Ki...to."

With her lips faltering, she spoke with disjointed sounds. Asuna felt her fears from the previous night returning. The girl's outer appearance was of at least eight years old; if you were to consider the time that had passed since she logged in, her actual age should have reached around ten by now. But the girl's shaky words, were as if they came from an infant who had just gained awareness.

"Hey, Yui-chan. Why were you on the twenty-second floor? Are your father or mother perhaps, anywhere near here?"

Yui moved her eyes downward and sank into silence. Keeping quiet for a moment, she shook her head back and forth.

"I don't... know... I don't... know, anything..."

After having been placed into a sitting posture on the chair at the dining table and offered some warm, sweet milk, the girl held the cup up to her chest with both hands and began sipping it. Watching over her out of the corner of her eye, Asuna decided to discuss the situation with Kirito a distance away from the girl.

"Hey, Kirito-kun. What are your thoughts...?"

Kirito chewed his lips with a serious expression, but soon spoke, with his face downcast.

"She doesn't... seem to have her memories. But, with those reactions... it's like, her mind was, damaged or..."

"Yeah... You think so too, huh..."

"Dammit."

Kirito's face distorted, seemingly on the verge of tears.

"In this world... I've seen many horrible things... but this is... the worst. This is just too cruel..."

Seeing his eyes turn watery, Asuna too, felt something bursting out from her chest. Wrapping her arms around Kirito, she spoke.

"It'll be alright, Kirito-kun. ...If it's us, there's definitely something... we can do."

"...Yeah. That's right..."

Kirito raised his head and smiled faintly, placing his hand on Asuna's shoulder and returned towards the dining table. Asuna followed behind him.

Moving a chair with a clatter, Kirito sat down beside Yui and started a conversation with a bright voice.

"Aah, Yui-chan. ...Can I just, call you Yui?"

Raising her face from the cup, Yui nodded.

"I see. Then, Yui can just call me, Kirito."

"Ki... to."

"It's, Kirito. Ki, ri, to."

"..."

Yui put on a complex expression and kept quiet for a moment.

"...Kiito."

Kirito broke into a grin and laid his hand on Yui's head.

"Maybe that was a bit difficult. You can just, call me with any other easier name you want."

Yui once again pondered for a while. She didn't stir an inch, even when Asuna picked the cup up from the table and refilled the milk.

Soon enough, Yui slowly raised her face and looked at Kirito, and timidly, she opened her mouth.

"...Papa."

Next, she turned to Asuna and spoke.

"Auna is... Mama."

Asuna trembled uncontrollably. She did not know if the girl had merely mistaken them for her actual parents, or perhaps— that her parents did not exist in this world at all, and she wanted them instead; but before dealing with that suspicion, Asuna frantically tried to restrain the feelings filling her heart and struggling to break loose and nodded with a smile.

"That's right... It's Mama, Yui-chan."

Hearing that, Yui broke into a smile for the first time. Under her straight fringe, her previously expressionless eyes shone with a gleam, and in that instant, color seemed to return to her face with doll-like features.

"...Mama!"

Looking at the arms outstretched towards her, Asuna felt a violent jolting pain within her chest.

"Uu..."

Earnestly holding back the tears threatening to overflow, she somehow managed to preserve her smile. She carried Yui's small frame from the chair, and as she firmly hugged her, Asuna felt a single tear, filled with a mess of different emotions, spill out and trickle down her cheek.

Finishing off her drink of hot milk and a small bun, Yui seemed to have grown sleepy once again, with her head starting to sway to and fro while sitting in the chair.

Looking at the girl's status while seated on the opposite side of the table, Asuna wiped her eyes with a jerking hand and looked towards Kirito, beside her.

"I-I..."

Despite opening her mouth, she was unable to form the words she wanted adequately.

"I'm sorry, I just have no idea, about what I should do..."

Kirito gazed upon Asuna with sympathetic eyes, but soon spoke with a sigh.

"...Until that kid regains her memories, you want to stay here and look after her, right? I understand... those feelings. I feel the same. But still... it's a real dilemma... If we do that, we can't return to completing the game for a while, and with that, the time needed to break this kid free from here will be delayed as well..."

"Yeah... that's true, after all..."

Putting herself aside, Asuna started thinking. Not to exaggerate, but Kirito's presence as a clearing player towered above the rest of them, providing maps of the traversable areas in the labyrinth, with the quantity beyond even many prominent guilds, while being a solo player. Despite planning it as just a few weeks of newly-wed life, monopolizing Kirito by herself like this was enough to make her feel traces of guilt.

"For now, let's just do what we can."

Looking over at Yui, who had dozed off, Kirito continued his words.

"Firstly, let's head for the Starting City and see if we can find the kid's parents or siblings. With her standing out so much as a player, I believe there's bound to be some people who recognize her, at least."

"..."

It was a natural conclusion. But Asuna noticed her feelings of not wanting to be separated from the girl, from within herself. It was the life where she could be alone with Kirito, that she had even dreamed about; but somehow, she had no objections with it becoming a group of three. It might be because she felt as if Yui would be like the child of Kirito and her... Getting to that line of thought, Asuna was startled and came to her senses, blushing to her ears.

"...? What's the matter?"

"I-It's nothing!!"

Asuna turned to Kirito, who looked suspicious, and shook her head back and forth.

"Th-That's right. When Yui-chan wakes up, let's go to the Starting City. We can put something up in the Q&A corner of the newspaper on the way too."

Still not able to look Kirito in the face, Asuna spoke quickly while tidying up the table in a hurry. When she looked towards Yui, sound asleep in the chair, perhaps it was just her imagination, but her sleeping face seemed different from yesterday, appearing more tranquil.

Moved to the bed, Yui slept through the entire morning, and wondering if she had gone into a coma again, Asuna nervously worried; but fortunately, she woke up just as the preparations for lunch were completed.

Despite baking a fruit pie, which she rarely ever makes, for Yui's sake, when Yui took her place at the table, rather than the pie, she showed more interest in a sandwich, filled with plenty of mustard, that Kirito was heartily biting into, perplexing the pair.

"Ah, Yui, this is really spicy."

"Uu... I want to, have the same as Papa."

"I see. I won't stop you if you've already made up your mind. Everything is an experience."

Handing a sandwich over, Yui widened her petite mouth with all her might and took a bite without even a single trace of hesitation.

The couple held their breaths as they watched over her, Yui, chewing the food with a complicated expression, finally swallowed it down her throat with a gulp and beamed cheerfully.

"Yummy."

"This one has got quite some guts."

Kirito too, smiled as he rubbed Yui's head.

"Let's challenge ourselves with a burning hot full course for dinner."

"Geez, don't get carried away! There's no way I'll make something like that!"

But if they were to find Yui's guardians at the Starting City, the only ones returning here will be just the two of them. Thinking so, Asuna felt a tinge of loneliness running through her heart.

Asuna faced towards Yui, who decided to finish up the rest of the sandwich and was drinking some milk tea with a satisfied look, before speaking.

"Oh, Yui-chan, let's go out for a bit in the afternoon."

"Go out?"

Looking straight at Yui's puzzled face, she paused, wondering how to explain when Kirito cut in.

"We're going to look for Yui's friends."

"Friends... What are those?"

Reacting to that answer, the two instinctively exchanged glances. There were many peculiar traits to Yui's «syndrome». Rather than merely her mental age receding, it was closer to giving the impression as if bits and pieces of her memory were vanishing.

In order to improve her condition, it would be best to find her actual guardians... Telling herself that, Asuna faced Yui and answered.

"Well, friends are the people who are able to help out Yui-chan. Now, let's get ready."

Yui's expression still showed signs of doubt, but she nodded and got up.

The white one-piece dress worn by the girl, having short puff sleeves and made from a thin material, looked like it would be cold to go out in during this season, the start of winter. Of course, feeling cold, or perhaps catching a cold, suffering from some damage, things like that do not happen— well, it would be a different story if you were to strip and go to a frigid area, but— The fact that one would usually feel at unease does not change.

Asuna scrolled through her item list, materializing heavy clothing, one after another, and when she finally found a sweater that suited the girl, she came to a sudden stop.

Normally, when equipping clothes, one would manipulate the equipment figure from the status window. Cloth, liquids and such soft objects were not very well reproduced in SAO, and thus, rather than an independent, separate object, clothes were treated as a part of the body instead.

Taking note of Asuna's hesitation, Kirito questioned Yui.

"Yui, about your window, can you open it?"

As expected, the girl tilted her head to the side in complete ignorance.

"Well then, try moving your finger on your right hand. Like this."

Kirito waved his finger, and a purple rectangular window appeared under his hand. Seeing that, Yui mimicked the motion with an unsteady hand, but the window did not open.

"...As I thought, there's some kind of system bug. But still, not being able to open your status is just way too serious... You can't do anything like that."

Just as Kirito bit his lips, in that instant. Getting annoyed, Yui, who was waving her finger on her right hand, waved her left hand instead this time. Right at that moment, a glowing purple window was displayed under her hand.

"It's out!"

Above Yui, who was grinning away with delight, Asuna exchanged glances with Kirito, who was taken aback with surprise. She had no idea what was going on any longer.

"Yui-chan, let me take a look."

Asuna leaned over and peered into the girl's window. However, the status was usually hidden to all except the owner, and all she got a glimpse of was a bare, plain screen.

"Sorry, let me have your hand."

Asuna took Yui's hand in hers, moving her slim index finger, clicking around where she thought the visibility mode button was by intuition.

Her aim accurate, the features of the screen soon came into sight with a short sound effect. Typically, as stealing a glance into another's status was considered a heavy breach of etiquette, despite the uncommon circumstances, Asuna tried her best to keep from looking at it and nimbly open only the inventory, but...

"Wh-What's with this!?"

The second she glanced across the top section of the screen, she burst out in astonishment.

The top screen of the menu window was normally separated into three areas. The arrangement was such that in the topmost section, the name was shown in English characters along with the long and thin HP and EXP bars, and below that, in the right half, would be the equipment figure, while the left half would be the summary of command buttons. There were countless sample designs to customize with for the icons and such, but the default layout cannot be changed. On the other hand, in the topmost section of Yui's window, only the strange name display, «Yui-MHCP001» exists, with neither the HP bar nor EXP bar, or even the level display. Although the equipment figure was there, the amount of command buttons was drastically less than usual, with only «Item» and «Option» there.

Finding Asuna's freeze fishy, Kirito approached and peeked into the window as well, losing his breath. Yui, not knowing the significance behind the window's abnormalities herself, looked up at the pair curiously.

"Is this also... a bug in the system...?"

Asuna muttered, and a deep groan escaped from Kirito's throat.

"For some reason... rather than a bug, it looks more like it was designed in this manner from the very start... Damn, I don't think I've ever been more irritated that there aren't any GMs around, more than I am today."

"Normally, in SAO, there aren't really any bugs or lag to speak of, so there isn't really any need for GMs... There's no point brooding about that issue anymore, I guess..."

Shrugging her shoulders, Asuna moved Yui's finger once again, opening up the inventory. Placing the sweater she picked up from the table onto it, the item was stored into the window with a glint of light. Next, she dragged the name of the sweater towards the equipment figure, dropping it there.

Along with a sound effect resembling a bell, Yui's body was enveloped in particles of light right away, modifying the light-pink sweater into an actual object onto her.

"Waah..."

Wearing a sunny expression, Yui stretched out her hands and looked down at her own body. Asuna continued, getting a skirt of a similar color with black tights, red shoes and equipping the items on, one after another, finally having returned the original one-piece dress back to the inventory, she dismissed the window.

Finished dressing, Yui looked delighted, rubbing her cheek against the fluffy sweater's texture and pulling on the skirt.

"Now, let's get going, then."

"Um. Papa, carry."

Responding to Yui reaching out with both hands without a care, Kirito shyly gave a wry smile as he lifted the girl's body up. While doing so, he glanced at Asuna, and spoke.

"Asuna, just in case, be prepared for battle anytime. We shouldn't be going out of the city, but... that is the «Army»'s territory, after all..."

"Hm... It's best not to let our guard down."

With a nod, Asuna checked through her own inventory and walked towards the door together with Kirito. It would be good if the girl's guardians were found; those really were her honest feelings, but imagining parting with Yui made her feel strangely uncomfortable. They had only known each other for a single day, but Yui seemed to have completely taken over a tender part of Asuna's heart.

It had actually been months since her last descent to the first floor, the «Starting City».

Feeling complex emotions within her, Asuna stood still near the teleport gate's exit, scouting out the huge plaza and the streets stretching out beyond that.

Of course, as this was Aincrad's largest city, comparing the number of facilities essential to adventuring here with those of other cities, there was no competition at all. Prices were generally low, and all sorts of inns could be found here. Judging in terms of efficiency, this was a most suitable place to be used as a base town.

However, if you were to go by Asuna's contacts, not even a single high level player had stayed in the Starting City all the way until now. The oppression from the «Army» was one of the reasons, but it was mainly due to the fact that when standing in the central plaza and looking up toward the sky, one could not help but recall what had happened back then.

The start of it all was merely a whim.

Born through a relationship between a businessman father and a scholar mother, Asuna— Yuuki Asuna, was raised, subjected to the expectations of her parents from the very time she gained awareness. Both of her parents were people who were mercilessly firm with themselves, while being gentle to Asuna, and due to that, she was afraid of how they would react if she did not live up to their expectations.

Her brother was probably the same. Both Asuna and her brother had gone to the private school chosen by their parents, and without a hitch, constantly retained their excellent results. From the time her brother finally reached the age to be admitted into university and left the house, she existed with nothing on her mind, but solely to live up to her parents' expectations. Taking up lessons for multiple activities, socializing only with friends approved by her parents, but as she went through life like that, Asuna eventually felt her world shrinking, as though it was steadily deflating. If she continued on this predetermined path— proceeding onwards to the high school and university chosen by her parents, marrying the partner chosen by her parents, she believed she would definitely be trapped within an extraordinarily hard shell, even smaller than she was then, and be forever unable to escape from it; these were the fears she had always suffered from.

That was why, when her brother was employed by the company managed by her father and came back home, speaking so spiritedly with a Nerve Gear and a copy of SAO that he had gotten through his connections, about what would become the world's first «VRMMO», even Asuna who had not touched a television console game before, felt a minor trace of interest about that strange new world.

Of course, if her brother were to use it in his own room, she probably would have soon forgotten and not bothered about things such as the Nerve Gear. However, thanks to bad timing, her brother had to go on a business trip overseas on the very first day of the start of the SAO service, and so, Asuna ended up requesting to borrow it from her brother, for just a single day on a mere whim. Feeling the desire to peek into a world she had never seen before, that was all it was—

And thus, everything changed.

Even now, she could still recall the excitement of that day, when she changed from Asuna to "Asuna", finding herself on an unknown street, among people unknown to her.

But immediately after that, when that god of emptiness descended down and announced this death game, with the inability to escape from this world, the first thing Asuna thought about was the Mathematics work that she did not yet start on.

If she did not hurry back and settle that, she would get scolded by her teacher in the following day's lesson. For the life that Asuna had led thus far, that would be a failure that she could not allow... but of course, the severity of the situation was not of such a degree.

One week, two weeks, even as each day was idly passed by, there was no sign of help from the outside. Secluding herself within one of the rooms of a Starting City's inn, cowering atop the bed, Asuna constantly experienced a ridiculous amount of panic. Screaming every now and then, even beating on the walls as she wailed. It was the winter of her third year in middle school. Soon would be her examinations, and after that, the new school term. Being derailed from that path was considered the same as the devastation of her life, to Asuna.

Asuna spent each day amidst troubled fits, embracing deep, murky convictions.

Rather than being concerned for their child's body, her parents were definitely busy being extremely disappointed over the daughter who failed her examinations due to a game console. Her friends, while suffering from some grief, were probably pitying the one who dropped out of their group, or perhaps sneering over it.

When she passed her critical point with those dark thoughts, Asuna finally made a decision— to leave the inn. Not waiting to be rescued, but to escape from here with her own strength. To become the savior who would put an end to this incident. If she hadn't taken that path, she most likely would not have been able to retain her presence within the minds of the people around her any longer.

Asuna prepared some equipment, memorized the entire reference manual, and headed out into the field. Sleeping time for each day was restricted to two, three hours, and the rest of her time was sunk into level training. As a result of focusing all of her natural wisdom and willpower into clearing the game, it was not long before she was able to enter the list of top level players. This was how the ardent swordswoman, Asuna the «Flash», was born.

And back to the present— Two years have passed, and the now seventeen year old Asuna looked back at the self from that time with bitter feelings. No, not just the period right after the game started. Towards all that had happened before that, that self that lived within that solid, shrinking world too, she recollected that part of her past with a wretched, painful sorrow.

She did not understand the meaning of what it was like «to live». All she had done was think of nothing but the ideal future, sacrificing the present in the process. The «now» was naught but the means to bring about the perfect future, and hence, with its demise, there was nothing left but to disappear into the middle of nothingness.

It was no good with only one or the other. Overlooking the world of SAO, she thus concluded seriously.

One chasing the future would be like what she once was, fanatically advancing towards the clearing of the game, while one clinging only to the past would still be cowering in an inn's room. And the one who lives only for the moment would seek transient pleasure as a criminal at times.

But despite being in this world, there were people who enjoyed the present, making memories, one after another, while working hard to escape. The one who taught that to her was the black-haired swordsman she met a year ago. The desire for his way of life— from the moment that entered her mind, the hue of her day to day life changed.

Now, even if it was in the real world, she felt like she would be able to break through that shell. She believed that she would be able to live for her own sake. As long as this person stayed by her side—

Asuna gently approached Kirito, embracing his own deep feelings as he stared down the streets. The pain that she felt once again, as she gazed upon the stone roof in the sky, was a mere, faint thing.

Shaking her head once as though she was trying to clear up her sentiments, Asuna peered into Yui's face, still being carried by Kirito.

"Yui-chan, do you have any memories of any buildings, or things like that?"

"Uu..."

With a complex expression, Yui looked around at the rock structures, extending out from the plaza, before finally shaking her head.

"I don't know..."

"Well, the Starting City is pretty darn big, after all."

Kirito spoke while rubbing Yui's head.

"Well, something will probably ring a bell sooner or later if we keep walking around. Let's just check out the central marketplace for now."

"I guess you're right."

Nodding in agreement, the couple started walking towards the main street to the south.

But still— As she walked, Asuna looked over the plaza once again with some doubt. There were an unexpectedly small number of people around.

The gate plaza of the Starting City was wide as expected, being able to fit all ten thousand players two years back, at the opening of the server. In the middle of all that stone-paved empty space in the shape of a perfect circle, lies a towering clock tower, with the teleport gate flickering blue

within its lower section. Flowerbeds extended out, set in concentric circles around the tower, with multiple elegant, white benches lined up between them. It would not be strange at all for it to be crowded with people seeking a moment of rest on such a nice afternoon; but all of the human figures around were either at the gate, or heading towards the plaza's exit, with barely anyone standing around or sitting on the benches.

For the major streets on the upper floors, the gate plaza would always be in a clutter with a flood of players engaging briskly in gossip, searching for party members, setting up modest street stalls; and as a result of all the people hanging around, even walking forward was difficult, but—

"Hey, Kirito-kun."

"Hm?"

Asuna asked as Kirito turned around.

"Around how many players are over here right now?"

"Hmm, well... The number of players still alive are around six thousand, and roughly thirty percent of that are still in the Starting City if we include the «Army»; so it would be just below two thousand, wouldn't it?"

"Considering that, don't you think there're too little people around?"

"When you point it out that way... Maybe they're gathered around the market?"

However, entering the main street from the plaza, even as they drew close to the market area with shops and carts lined up, the streets remained quiet. The random touting from the energetic NPC shopkeepers echoed futilely through the streets.

Despite that, they were able to find a man sitting under a large tree in the middle of the street, and Asuna approached and tried calling out to him.

"Ah, excuse me."

The man, staring upwards towards the treetops with an oddly serious expression, spoke as though it was a bother, without adjusting his view.

"What is it?"

"Well... Around this area, are there any places that act as a space for searching for people?"

Hearing those words, the man finally shifted his vision towards Asuna. He scrutinized Asuna's face without reserve.

"What, so you were an outsider."

"Ah, yes. Well... we're kind of trying to look for the guardians of this child..."

She pointed at Yui, dozing off while held in Kirito's arms, behind her.

Garbed in a plain uniform that made it hard to determine his class, the man widened his eyes slightly when he gave a fleeting glance at Yui, but he soon moved his view back to the treetops.

"...A lost child, huh, that's rare. ...At the church beside the river of the seventh district in the east, there's a bunch of kid players gathered and living there, so try there."

"Th-Thank you."

Able to get ahold of surprisingly promising information, Asuna quickly bowed her head. Having done that, she tried putting out another question.

"Ahh... Just what, are you doing over here? And also, why are there so little people around?"

Even as the man made a grimace, he replied, apparently not as bothered as he might appear.

"That would be a classified secret, or so I would like to say. Well, seeing as you're outsiders... Look, you can see it, right? That high branch over there."

Asuna followed the path of the man's outstretched finger. The overhanging branches of the sizable trees by the road were vividly dyed in the colors of autumn, but if you were to focus and stare at them, you could spot several yellow fruits, springing up in the shadows of the leaves.

"Of course, as the roadside trees are indestructible objects, even if you climb it, you won't even be able to get a single leaf off it."

The man continued his words.

"Everyday, there's a few times when that fruit falls down... There's only a few minutes before it rots and disappears, but if you don't miss that chance and manage to pick it up, you can sell it to the NPC for quite a bit. Not to mention it tastes pretty good."

"Ohhh."

For Asuna, who had mastered her cooking skill, discussions about ingredient items were of remarkable interest.

"Around how much does it go for?"

"...Don't spread this around. For each of them, five col."

"..."

Looking upon the man's proud expression, Asuna was unintentionally rendered speechless. She was surprised by just how cheap the price was. In that case, toiling by clinging onto this tree for the entire day did not quite match up with the results.

"Ah, well... In that case, it's not quite worth it, or rather... If you were to just defeat a single worm in the field, you could get thirty col."

At the moment she said that, the man stared in wonder this time. He did not quite accuse her of not being right in the head, but turned towards Asuna with an expression showing how absurd he thought it was.

"You seriously saying that? If you were to go and fight monsters in the field... You might actually die, wouldn't you."

"..."

Asuna could not think of a reply. It was just as the man had said; fighting against monsters always had the danger of death accompanying it. But with Asuna's current mentality, it was like worrying about getting into a traffic accident while crossing the road in the real world all day and night; there was no use getting scared over it.

Whether her own sense of death in SAO had been dulled, or whether the man was being overly nervous, being unable to judge that in an instant, Asuna stood motionlessly still. Probably, neither of them could be considered as correct. At the Starting City, what the man had said was definitely common sense.

Not taking any notice of Asuna's complicated mental state, the man continued speaking.

"And, what was it, the reason why there isn't anyone around? It's not that they aren't around. Everyone's cooped up in their inn rooms. They might meet up with the Army's tax collection force in the daytime, after all."

"Ta-Tax collection... Just what do you mean by that?"

"It's just the polite way of saying extortion. Be on the lookout; those guys won't spare you even if you're outsiders. Oh, looks like one's falling... that's the end of this chat."

Shutting his mouth, the man started glaring at the skies seriously. Asuna quickly bowed, and noticing that Kirito had kept his silence during the entire conversation, turned around to her back.

At that spot, was Kirito's figure, focusing on the yellow fruit with a serious look, not unlike that worn in the midst of combat. It seems that he intends to go all out to attain the next fruit that drops.

"Stop that already, geez!"

"B-But you see, doesn't it bother you?"

Gripping Kirito by the nape of his neck, Asuna started walking while dragging him away.

"Ah, ahh... and it looked good too..."

Pulling Kirito by his ear, with his regrets still lingering, she forced him to turn around.

"Rather than that, which way is the seventh eastern district? There seems to be young players living together there, so let's try going there."

"...Yeeah."

Taking over Yui, who had completely fallen asleep, and holding onto her tightly, Asuna pored over the map while keeping pace beside Kirito.

As Yui had the external form of someone around ten years of age, doing something like this in the real world would cause her arms to fail in just a few minutes, but thanks to the compensation from her physical strength parameter, Asuna felt the weight of nothing more than a pillow filled with feathers.

Walking towards the south-east through the spacious streets for ten minutes, barely passing by anyone as before, they finally approached a

vast garden-like area. The forest of broad-leaved trees with their colors changing were waving dejectedly in the cold winds of the early winter.

"Let's see, this is shown as the eastern seventh district on the map, but... I wonder just where is that church."

"Ah, isn't it over there?"

Beyond the forest, stretching out on the right side of the road, Asuna spotted a distinctively tall spire and fixed her sight in that direction. At the summit of the ashen blue roofed tower, a metal ankh formed by combining a cruciform with a circle, was gleaming. It was the unmistakable mark of a church, of which at least one exists in every town. And through the altar inside, tasks such as removing the attack unique to monsters, «Curse», and the blessing of weapons to go up against undead monsters with, were possible. In SAO, where magic-based components barely exist, it could be considered a most mysterious place. Also, as long as col was regularly offered, a small room within the church could be borrowed and used as a replacement for an inn.

"Wa-Wait a moment."

Asuna unwittingly called Kirito to a stop, just as he was planning to walk towards the church.

"Hm? What is it?"

"Ah, no... Well... if, we happen upon Yui's guardians over there, we'll be... leaving Yui-chan there, right...?"

"..."

Kirito's black eyes softened with sympathy towards Asuna. He drew his arms close, gently embracing Asuna's body along with the sleeping Yui.

"I don't want to part with her either. Just how do I say this... with Yui's presence, that house in the forest really felt like it became a real home... well, that was how it felt like... But, it's not like you'll never meet again. If Yui regains her memories, she'll definitely come and visit again."

"Hm... That's right."

Giving a small nod, Asuna brought Yui, still in her arms, closer and lightly grazed her cheek, before walking forth, having resolved her feelings.

The church building was a mere trifle when compared with the scale of the city. It was a two-storied building, with only a single spire that acted as its symbol. But still, there were multiple churches within the Starting City, and the ones near the gate plaza were at the size of a minor castle.

Reaching the grand double doors in the front, Asuna pushed one of them open with her right hand. Being a public facility, it was naturally not locked. The interior was dim, and only the flames from the candles, decorating the altar at the front, burned, weakly illuminating the stone-paved flooring. There were no signs of life at first glance.

Popping only her upper body through the entrance, Asuna called out.

"Ahh, is there anyone here?"

Even as the sound of her voice trailed away with an echo effect, no one seemed to have appeared.

"Is there no one here...?"

As she tilted her head to the side, Kirito refuted her in a low voice.

"Nah, there's people. Three in the right room, four in the left... And more on the second floor."

"...With the detection skill, you're even able to tell the number of people beyond walls?"

"From the proficiency of nine hundred and eighty, that is. It's pretty handy, so you should increase it too."

"No way, training is so boring that I'll just go crazy. ...Putting that aside, I wonder why they're hiding..."

Asuna softly stepped into the church's interior. The surroundings were engulfed in a deathly silence, but she somehow felt the presence of people concealing their breaths within.

"Ah, excuse me, we're searching for someone!"

She tried calling out in a louder voice. With that— the door on the right side opened just the slightest bit, and a feeble female voice sounded out from there.

"...You aren't from the «Army», are you?"

"We aren't. We came here from the upper floors."

Both Asuna and Kirito did not have their swords, or even a single piece of armor meant for battle put on. Players belonging to the Army had a uniform of heavy armor on at all times, so one should be able to tell that they were unrelated to the Army even through appearances alone.

Soon enough, the door creaked open, and a single female player timidly showed up.

A head of dull blue short hair, with a large pair of glasses with black rims, and within those, deep green eyes were opened wide, filled with apprehension. Dressed in a plain dress of a simple dark blue shade, she had a dagger sheathed in its scabbard in her hand.

"You really... aren't from the Army's tax collection group, right...?"

Asuna gave the woman a reassuring smile, and nodded.

"Yes, we are searching for someone and just got here from above today. We're absolutely not related to the Army at all."

In that instant—

"From above!? You mean that you're actual swordsmen!?"

Along with a high-pitched boyish shout, the door behind the woman opened wide, and several human figures ran out disorderly. Immediately following that, the door on the left side of the altar was thrown open as well, and similarly, several people burst out.

Taken aback with surprise, as Asuna and Kirito watched over the scene without speaking, the ones lined up in a row on both sides of the bespectacled woman were all young players who could be considered as young boys and girls. The youngest was probably twelve, while the oldest would be around fourteen. All of them were in a state of keen interest over Asuna and Kirito, ogling all over them.

"Hey, all of you, I said to stay hidden in the room, didn't I!"

Only the woman, pushing back the children in a fluster, could be seen as around twenty of age. That said, not a single child was following her order.

But right after that, the first one who ran out from the room, a boy with short, red, bristling hair standing up on end yelled out in a disappointed tone.

"What's with that, you aren't even holding a single sword. Hey, didn't you come from above? Shouldn't you have a weapon at least?"

The latter half of those words were directed at Kirito.

"N-No, it's not that we don't have any, but..."

Kirito replied as he darted his eyes about in surprise, and the children's faces instantly brightened up once again. Lemme see, lemme see, all of them pleaded insistently.

"See here now, you can't just go about speaking so impolitely to people you've just met. —Sorry, we rarely ever welcome any guests around, so..."

Facing the truly sorry-looking bespectacled woman bowing down, Asuna spoke in a hurry.

"N-No, it's not a problem. —Hey, Kirito-kun, I think you have some still left in your inventory, so why don't you let them see?"

"Y-Yeah."

Nodding to Asuna's proposal, Kirito opened a window and moved his finger, changing about ten weapon-type items into objects at the same time, and piling them up on the long table nearby. They were items dropped by monsters during a recent adventure that were left alone as he did not have the time to sell them off yet.

Kirito closed the window, with all of the surplus items except the couple's equipment taken out, and the children cheered loudly and swarmed around them. Getting a feel of the swords, maces and such, one after another, cries of "Heavy" and "Cool" soon resounded. It was a scene that would leave any overprotective parent faint, but no matter how weapons were handled within towns, it was impossible for them to suffer any damage.

"—I'm truly sorry..."

Although the bespectacled woman bowed her head down troubled, a smile came to her face at the sight of the delighted children, and she spoke.

"...Ah, do come this way. I'll prepare some tea, so..."

Guided to the small room in the place of worship, Asuna and Kirito took a sip of the hot tea offered to them and let out a relieved sigh.

"Then... you mentioned that you came to search for someone...?"

The bespectacled female player sitting on the opposing chair asked, with a slight incline of her head.

"Ah, yes. Er... I'm Asuna, and this person would be Kirito."

"Ahh, excuse me, I haven't even given my name yet. I am Sasha."

And she quickly bowed with her introduction.

"And, this child is Yui."

While brushing the hair of the still sleeping Yui on her lap, Asuna continued.

"This child got lost in the middle of the forest on the twenty-second floor. She... seemed to have lost her memories, so..."

"My..."

The woman who called herself Sasha widened her large deep green eyes, hidden behind her glasses.

"She didn't have anything aside from clothes equipped either, so it didn't seem like she lived on the upper floors... And so, perhaps her guardians are at the Starting City... or maybe people who knew this child might be around, we thought; hence, we came here to find them. Thus, when we heard that the children were gathered at the church here..."

"So that was how it was..."

Sasha grasped the cup within her hands, and dropped her gaze to the table.

"...Right now, there are twenty living here in this church, children from grade school to children around middle school. I believe it should be, more or less, all of the child players around in this city. At the time this game started..."

Sasha began to speak in a hushed, but clear tone.

"Almost that many children went into panic attacks and essentially underwent mental problems. Of course, there were children who got used to the game and left the city, but I believe them to be the exceptions."

It was something that Asuna experienced too, in her third year of middle school at that time. When she secluded herself in that inn room, she believed that she certainly did feel her mind crumbling away, almost driven to a corner.

"It's only to be expected; they were still at the age when they wanted to be spoiled by their parents. To be suddenly told something like them being unable to get out from here, maybe even never ever returning to the real world— those children mostly broke down, and within them... it seems there were some that broke the connection just like that."

Sasha's mouth firmly grew stiff.

"For a month or so after the game started, I thought about aiming for the completion of the game and went to train in the field, but... one day, I saw one of those children at a street corner, and I just couldn't leave the child alone; so I brought the child with me and started living together in the inn. And then, when I thought of all the other children still around like that child, I started to go about the city, so as to call out to children by themselves. Before I knew it, it turned out this way. That's why, somehow... despite there being people fighting at the upper floors like the two of you, to think that I dropped out, it feels inexcusable."

"That's... That's not—"

While shaking her head, Asuna struggled with all her might to find the appropriate words, but her voice was caught in her throat. Picking up the slack, Kirito spoke.

"That's not true at all. You're fighting valiantly... Much greater than someone like me is."

"Thank you very much. But I'm not quite doing this out of a sense of duty. It's been very enjoyable living with these children."

Sasha smiled sweetly and stared at the sleeping Yui worriedly.

"That's why... For two years straight, we went through all the buildings in an area each day, checking to see if there were any children who needed help. If there was such a small child left around, we would have definitely

noticed. I'm sorry to say this... but as for this child, I don't believe she was living in the Starting City."

"Is that so..."

Asuna hung her head down, hugging tightly onto Yui. She pulled herself together and looked towards Sasha.

"Er, this seems like it would be intruding into your privacy, but how do you get by, for your daily living expenses and such?"

"Ah, for that, aside from me, there are several older children protecting this place around... they're at a level that ensures their complete safety as long as they stay within the fields around this city, so we can still do something about our food supply. We can't afford to live luxuriously though."

"Oh, that's amazing... Judging from what I heard earlier in the city, something like hunting monsters in the field is considered a suicidal act that goes against common sense."

Sasha nodded at Kirito's words.

"Basically, I believe that's what all of the players left in the Starting City think. I won't deny that idea; it can't really be helped, when you consider there's the danger of death... However, that could also be the reason why we're earning more money when compared to the average player in this city."

That was certainly true; to regularly reserve the guest room in this church, a hundred col would probably be needed every day. It was an amount that greatly exceeded the daily income of that fruit hunter from earlier.

"That is why I've been keeping my eyes on them recently..."

"...On who?"

Sasha's gentle eyes turned stern in an instant. Just as she opened her mouth to continue her words, at that moment...

"Sensei! Sasha-sensei! It's horrible!!"

The door to the room slammed open, and several children flooded in like an avalanche.

"Hey now, you're being rude to our guests!"

"That's not the matter here!!"

The red-haired youth from earlier shouted, with tears threatening to spill from his eyes.

"Ginn-bro and the others have been captured by the Army!"

"—Where!?"

Getting up with a manner so resolute that it felt as though she became another person, Sasha asked of the young boy.

"At the vacant land behind the second-hand shop at the fifth eastern district. The Army is blocking the passageway with ten people or so. Kotta was the only one who managed to get away."

"Understood, I'll go right away. —Excuse me, but..."

Turning around to face Asuna and Kirito, Sasha lightly bowed her head.

"I cannot just ignore the children in need. We will continue the conversation later on..."

"We'll go as well, sensei!!"

As the red-haired boy cried out, the entire crowd of children behind too, shouted out in agreement. Rushing next to Kirito, the boy had a desperate expression as he spoke.

"Bro, let us have the weapons from earlier for a while! If we have them, even those guys from the Army will run away!"

"I cannot accept that!"

Sasha let loose her refusal.

"The lot of you will wait here!"

At that time, Kirito, who had been watching over the development silently, raised his right hand, as though to pacify the children. He rarely ever read the air or understood the extent of conversations right, but only at times like this, did he exhibit a mysterious presence, quickly silencing the children.

"—It's a pity though—"

Kirito began speaking in a composed tone.

"The parameters required for that weapon are way too high, so someone like you wouldn't be able to equip it. We'll help you out. Even if she does look like that, that big sis over there is unreasonably strong."

Glancing at Kirito, Asuna too, returned a firm nod. Getting up, she turned towards Sasha and opened her mouth.

"Please allow us to help as well. Having more manpower should be for the best."

"—Thank you, I'll be counting on you."

Sasha gave a deep bow, firmly pulled up her glasses, and spoke.

"Well then, forgive me, but we'll be running!"

Rushing out from the church, Sasha began running straight ahead with her dagger shaking on her waist. Holding onto Yui, Asuna too, chased behind her along with Kirito. As Asuna glanced towards her back while running, she found a huge crowd of children following behind, but it did not seem like Sasha had any intention to send them away.

Weaving their way through the groves of trees, they entered the sixth eastern district and dove through the back alleys. It seemed that they were taking shortcuts for the shortest distance possible, and as they crossed through NPC store fronts, gardens belonging to private houses and such, they spotted a group blocking the thin alleyway in front. There were probably at least ten people. Dressed in uniform ash-green and steel-black equipment, they were unmistakably members of the «Army».

As Sasha, who was dashing through the alleyways without hesitation, drew to a stop, she caught the attention of the players from the Army, and they turned around with a broad grin.

"Oh, the baby-sitter is here."

"...Please return the children."

Sasha spoke with an unwavering voice.

"Don't just tarnish our reputation like that. We'll return them soon; we're just instilling some proper social etiquette into them."

"Yeah, yeah. The townspeople do have their responsibility to pay up their taxes, after all."

The men went wa-ha-ha-ha, letting loose raucous laughter. Sasha's tightly closed fist trembled.

"Ginn! Kain! Mina!! Are you there!?"

When Sasha called out towards the men, a frightened girlish voice soon rang out in response.

"Sensei! Sensei... help us!"

"Don't worry about the money, just hand it all over!"

"Sensei... we can't just...!"

This time, it was a strained boyish voice.

"Nha, ha, ha."

One of the men blocking up the road spluttered out a laugh that resembled a spasm.

"Well, it's all because you guys haven't been paying up quite a bit of taxes... Money just isn't enough like this, eh."

"That's right, that's right. We'll have you drop your equipment here too. All of your armor too... every single, last piece."

Looking on at the men's vulgar smirks, Asuna instantly guessed at the state of affairs from within the alley. This «tax collection force» was no doubt demanding for the group of children, which included a girl, to take off all of their clothes as well. A fury close to blood-thirst began swelling within Asuna.

Sasha seemed to have reached the same conclusion, drew closer to the men, brimming with hostility.

"Get out... Get out of my way! Otherwise..."

"Otherwise what, baby-sitter? You gonna pay the tax in their place?"

The smirking men made no effort to move whatsoever.

Within towns, or within the boundary of the town's range, so to speak, as the program known as the Crime Protection Code is always activated, trying to inflict damage, as well as attempts to move other players against their will were completely impossible. But in return, malicious players

blocking paths cannot be eliminated. Sealing up the roadway by standing there, to «block»; even getting several people to surround the target directly to immobilize the victim, to «box»; the existence of these unethical harassment methods ended up being allowed.

That said, those acts were only effective in cases where one was moving on the ground after all. Asuna looked at Kirito, and spoke.

"Let's go, Kirito-kun."

"Yeah."

Nodding in agreement, they casually kicked off the ground.

Towards the pair jumping using all of their dexterity and strength, Sasha and the member of the Army could only look up dumbfounded as they soared over them easily, landing in the space that was enclosed from all sides.

"Woah!?"

Several men in there jumped back with fright.

In the corner of the area, two boys and a girl in their early tens were huddled together stiffly. Their armor was already removed, dressed only in simple underwear. Asuna bit her lips, stepped up to the children, and spoke with a smile on.

"It's alright now. You can return your equipment."

The youths immediately nodded with round eyes, picking up the armor at their feet frantically, and started operating their windows.

"Oi... Oi, oi, oi!!"

At that moment, a player from the Army finally came to his senses and shouted out loud.

"The heck's with you guys!! Don't you dare obstruct the work of the «Army»!!"

"Now, now, wait a bit."

Stopping that, a man with noticeably heavier armor stepped forward. He seemed to be the leader of the group.

"We haven't seen you guys around, but do you know what it means to go against the Liberation Force? If you still intend to, we can even hear out your case in detail at the headquarters."

The leader's slim eyes shone with a vile light. Pulling out a large broadsword from his waist, he stepped up while repeatedly striking the sword blade with his palm, as if on purpose. The surface of the sword glittered with the light from the low-lying setting sun. A shallow gleam typical of a weapon that had never experienced or been repaired from damage even a single time.

"Or do you want to bring this «outside the boundary» to settle it, outside the boundary? Eh!?"

At the moment she heard that single phrase.

The clenching of Asuna's teeth rang out. She thought it best to settle the matter amicably, but when she saw the youths shivering with fear, her fury had already passed her limit.

"...Kirito-kun, I'll leave Yui-chan to you."

Yui was handed over to Kirito, and before anyone knew what was happening, he had already flung out the materialized Asuna's rapier with a single hand. Drawing the sword as she received it, she nimbly moved towards the leader.

"A.... Ah...?"

Facing the man, still unable to catch up with the situation with his mouth left half-open, Asuna suddenly threw all her power into a single-handed stab.

The surroundings were dyed in a violet flash of light. The sound of an impact on the level of an explosion. The man's menacing face was thrown back, and he fell backwards onto his rear in a daze, with his eyes still open.

"If you wish for a battle that much, there's no need to go all the way to the field."

Walking right up to the man, Asuna once again brandished her right hand. The flash repeated, and a deafening sound rumbled out. The leader tumbled backwards, as though he was repelled.

"Don't worry, your HP didn't drop after all. Well, thanks to that though, I don't have to stop either."

Looking up at the figure of Asuna approaching with steady steps with trembling lips, the leader appeared to have finally realized what she implied.

Within the range of the Crime Prevention Code, even if attacks from weapons are targeted at players, it will be stopped by an invisible barrier and no damage will be inflicted. But this rule too, had an alternate significance: that the attacker would have no worries of being corrupted into the colors reserved for criminals.



An example that uses that fact would be the «Within Boundary Battle», usually done as a mock battle used for practice. However, with the increase of the attacker's stats and skills, the noise of the impact and the luminosity of the color created by the system, at the time the Code was activated, will be intensified accordingly; And in addition to that, with the power of the sword skill used, though slight, a knockback effect would be produced as well. For people not used to it, it was not an easy thing to bear, even if they do understand that their HP was not reduced.

"Eek... s-sto..."

Knocked down onto the ground by Asuna's sword attack, the leader screeched out.

"You guys... don't just watch... do something about it...!!"

Finally regaining their senses with that voice, the members of the Army pulled out their weapons one after another.

The blocking players, who sensed the abnormality of the situation, ran in too, from the north and south roads.

Surrounded by the men in the shape of a semicircle, Asuna faced them with eyes blazing brightly, as though she had returned to the time when she was the ardent warrior. Kicking off the ground without a word, she sliced the troops right before her.

In just an instant, the narrow space was filled with the consecutively howling of a thunderous roar.

About three minutes later.

As Asuna, having regained her senses, stopped moving and lowered her sword, all that laid within that area, were the collapsed bodies of the players from the Army, scattered around. The only ones left all seemed to have deserted their leader and escaped.

"Whew..."

Taking a large breath of air, she sheathed her rapier back into its scabbard and turned around— all she saw were the figures of Sasha and the children from the church, standing stock still, lost for words.

"Ah..."

Asuna took a step back as she held her breath. She believed that she had definitely frightened the children when she abandoned herself to her fury and lashed out earlier, and cast her eyes down in depression.

But at that moment, the usual boy who stood at the head of the children, with his combed back red hair, cried out with his eyes sparkling.

"Amazing... That was amazing, sis!! That was the first time I saw anything like that!!"

"I told you that this big sister was unreasonably strong, didn't I?"

Kirito stepped forward with a broad smile. Holding onto Yui with his left hand, a sword hung lowered on his right. It seemed that he had faced off several others.

"...A-Ahaha."

Asuna laughed, feeling troubled, and the children suddenly gave several loud cheers, jumping towards her.

Sasha held her two hands tightly before her bosom, smiling with eyes that seemed to be holding back tears.

"Everyone's.... Everyone's hearts are—"

A slight, but clear voice resounded. Asuna raised her face, startled. Within Kirito's arm, Yui who had awoken without anyone noticing, looked towards blank air and reached out with her right hand.

Asuna looked towards that direction in a fluster, but there was nothing there.

"Everyone's hearts... are..."

"Yui! What's the matter, Yui!!"

Kirito cried out, and Yui blinked twice or thrice, looking on with a blanked out expression. Asuna too, ran up in her confusion, grasping onto Yui's hand.

"Yui-chan... could it be, that you remembered something!?"

"...I... I..."

Frowning, she hung her head down.

"I, wasn't... here... Always, by myself, in the darkness..."

Frowning as though she recalled something, she bit her lips. And, at that moment...

"Wa... aa... aaah!!"

Throwing her head back, a high-pitched shriek surged out from her slender throat.

"...!?"

Zsh, zsh, a sound similar to electronic noise reverberated within Asuna's ears for the first time ever since she was in SAO. Immediately after that, Yui's petrified body started trembling here and there, as though they were decaying away.

"Yu... Yui-chan...!"

Asuna screamed and wrapped her hands around that body frantically.

"Mama... scary... Mama...!!"

Holding up the feebly moaning Yui from Kirito's arm, Asuna tightly embraced her within her chest. Several seconds later, the mysterious phenomenon settled down, and the strength escaped from Yui's rigid body.

"What... happened just now..."

The hollow murmur from Kirito faintly flowed through the empty space consumed in silence.

### Part 3

"Everyone, take one piece of bread each!"

"Hey, it'll spill if you don't pay attention!"

"Aah, sensei! Ginn stole my sunny-side-up fried egg!"

"I gave you my carrots in return, didn't I!"

"This is... pretty amazing..."

"Yea, it is..."

Both Asuna and Kirito gazed upon the scene of a breakfast, resembling a battlefield unfolding right before their eyes, and muttered to each other in a daze.

The Starting City, the guest room within the church of the seventh eastern district. Large plates of eggs, sausages, vegetable salads and such were lined up on a pair of huge, long tables, nearly overflowing them, and were ravaged by twenty or so children in a grand riot.

"But still, it looks like they're really having fun."

At the circular table slightly away, Asuna sat with Kirito, Yui, and Sasha, smiling as she brought a cup of tea to her lips.

"It's like this every day. It doesn't sink in no matter how many times they're told to be quiet."

Having said that, Sasha narrowed her eyes filled with love from the bottom of her heart, as she looked at the children.

"You really do like children, don't you?"

Asuna spoke, and Sasha smiled with embarrassment.

"On the other side, I was training to become a teacher in university. You see, classroom chaos has always been a problem, hasn't it? The chance to be able to guide children; I've always gotten fired up by it. But when I came here, when I started living with those children, just about everything was different from what I believed in... It felt like I was the one relying on them instead; that they were supporting me more rather than the other way around. But, well, that might be fine too... I started believing that it was merely a natural result."

"Well, I guess I do understand somehow."

Asuna nodded, softly brushing Yui's head, who was earnestly putting a spoon to her mouth beside her. The warmth brought about by Yui's existence surprised her. It was different from the heartrending love she felt in her chest that tightened when touched by Kirito; it was like being tucked into unseen feathers, before being covered once again; a quiet serenity.

Yesterday, passing out after going into a mysterious fit, Yui fortunately came to after several minutes. However, as Asuna did not want to immediately make any long trips or use the teleport gate, and also partly due to Sasha's keen invitation, they ended up borrowing one of the Church's available rooms for the night.

Yui's condition seemed well since the morning, so Asuna and Kirito were relieved for the moment, but her original circumstances had not changed. According to the faint memories that seemed to have returned to Yui, she appears to have never come to the Starting City, and in the first place, she was not living with a guardian. In that case, the origin of the defect in Yui's memory, the symptom of her regression back to an infant, was absolutely unknown, and they were at a loss for what they should be doing next.

But Asuna had tempered the feelings from the depths of her heart.

From now on too, she would continue living together with Yui until the day her memory returns. Even if her break were to end, and she had to return to the frontlines, there should be a way to somehow—

As Asuna got lost in her anxiety while stroking Yui's hair, Kirito put down his cup and started speaking.

"Sasha-san..."

"Yes?"

"...Well, it's about the Army. To the extent of my knowledge, despite the overwhelming tyranny from those guys, they were still determined to maintain public order. But looking back at those guys from yesterday, it was as if they were criminals... Since when has it been like that?"

Sasha tensed her mouth and answered.

"The time I felt their change in objectives should have been around half a year ago... There were some who committed acts of extortion under the name of tax collection, as well as others who, on the other hand, cracked

down on those. I have also witnessed scenes of fellow members of the Army confronting each other several times. According to rumours, it seems that there were power struggles among the higher-ups or something like that..."

"Yeaah... Well, they're still an enormous organization of over a thousand members now, after all. There's no way they're monolithic though... But still, if what happened yesterday was a daily affair, they shouldn't be able to just leave it alone... Asuna."

"What?"

"Does that guy know about this situation?"

Guessing at whom Kirito referred to with those reluctantly spoken words, "that guy," Asuna spoke as she held back a smile.

"Well, I guess he would know... Leader Heathcliff is knowledgeable, even about the movements of the Army, after all. But about him, how should I say this, he doesn't seem to have much interest in anyone aside from the high levelled clearers... He has asked various things about Kirito-kun in the past, but at the time of the subjugation of the murder guild, «Laughing Coffin», he just left us with a single line going, "I'll leave it to you." Hence, I believe that he probably wouldn't mobilize the clearing group for the sake of influencing the Army."

"Well, it does seem like it's possible when you consider that guy... But in that case, we can't really do much with just us around."

Knitting his brows as he sipped his tea, Kirito suddenly raised his face and looked towards the entrance of the church.

"Someone's here. A single person..."

"Eh... Could it be another guest..?"

As if to emphasize Sasha's words, a loud knock resounded throughout the building.

The one who entered the dining room with Sasha, a dagger hung on her waist, and Kirito, who followed her to be certain, was a female player of tall stature.

Long, silver hair tied up in a ponytail- her appearance gave off the impression of intelligence, and her sky-blue eyes shone intensely with light on her sharp, well-featured face.

Hairstyle, hair color, and even the color of the eyes' pupils can be customized to one's will in SAO, but as what most of the system had to work with were Japanese, players that suit strong hues of color like this could be said to be fairly rare. Asuna too, had once tried dying her hair to cherry pink herself; it was an unmentionable past in which she returned it to brown in disappointment.

She was a beautiful person, and having gained a first impression that included some yearning for her adult-like image, Asuna dropped her gaze once more, towards the girl's equipment, and her body stiffened up on reflex.

Though it was hidden by an iron-grey cape on her body, she wore a dark green coat with leggings well-fitted on her thighs; the metal armor with a dull gleam was unmistakably the uniform of the «Army». On the right side of her waist was a shortsword, and a curled up whip hung on her left.

The children who had noticed the woman's appearance sank into silence all at once and stopped moving with their eyes dyed in vigilance. However, Sasha smiled towards the children and spoke as though she was easing their distrust.

"Everyone, it's fine, don't worry about this lady. Continue your meal."

The children threw a questionable glance, but with those words from Sasha, in whom they had placed their utmost trust, everyone released the tension in their shoulders feeling relieved, and the clamor immediately returned to the dining room. The female player who walked all the way to the circular table in the midst of all that took a chair offered by Sasha and sat down with a short bow.

Not understanding the situation, Asuna looked at Kirito questioningly, and he, who sat down in a chair, too, inclined his head to the side as he faced Asuna and spoke.

"Er, well, this person is Yulier-san. It seems that she has something to tell us."

The silver-haired whip-user who was introduced as Yulier looked straight at Asuna for a moment, before quickly bowing her head and opening her mouth.

"Good to meet you, I'm Yulier. I belong to the guild, ALF."

"ALF?"

Asuna asked in return at the name she had heard of for the first time, prompting Yulier to give a slight bow with her head.

"Ah, excuse me. That would be the abbreviation for the Aincrad Liberation Force. I don't quite like the official name, so..."

Her voice was that of a composed, elegant alto. Feelings of envy grew even larger within Asuna, who had always thought her own voice was childish, as she returned the greetings.

"Nice to meet you. I am the guild, Knights of the Blood's— ah, no, I'm currently retired for the time being, but you can call me Asuna. And this child is Yui."

Having emptied the serving of soup in the time passed and presently challenging the fruit juice, Yui suddenly raised her face, closely watching Yulier. She slightly inclined her head, but soon gave a sweet smile, retreating her gaze.

The moment the name of the Knights of the Blood reached Yulier's ears, she opened her sky-blue eyes wide.

"KoB... I see, in that case, it's no wonder those guys were easily dealt with."

Asuna, who figured "those guys" referred to the assault and extortion group from yesterday, heightened her wariness as she spoke.

"...In other words, you're here to question the incident from yesterday, is that it?"

"No, no, that's not it at all. It's the opposite; it's more like I wanted to express my thanks for doing a good job."

"..."

Facing towards Kirito and Asuna, who were silent as they tried to get ahold of the situation, Yulier straightened herself up.

"Today, I came here with a request for the two of you."

"A-A request...?"

Nodding as her hair of silver swayed, the swordswoman from the Army continued.

"Yes. Then I'll start my explanations from the very start. What is known as the Army, wasn't named as such since long ago... The reason why the ALF became the current name for the Army, is due to the fact that a former sub-leader, a man named, Kibaou, who is presently the influential head, took control over it. Initially, it had the guild name, MTD... Have you ever heard of it?

Asuna did not recall ever hearing of it, but Kirito gave an immediate reply.

"That's probably the abbreviation for «MMO Today». At the time SAO started, it was the biggest net-game information gathering site in Japan. The one who formed the guild should have been the administrator from there. If I'm not wrong, the name was..."

"Thinker."

At the moment the name was spoken, Yulier's face contorted slightly.

"He... was definitely not trying to make a self-righteous organization like how it is now. All he wanted was to equally share information and food resources among as many players as possible..."

Even Asuna knew all about the ideals and collapse of the «Army» during that time through hearsay. The ideal of hunting down monsters with many people, lowering the level of danger as much as they could, through which they were able to earn a steady income and spreading that out equally, was not flawed in itself. But the essence of MMORPGs was the scramble for resources by players for themselves, and that had not changed, even with the strange, not to mention, extreme conditions attached to a game such as SAO. No, actually, it could be said that those conditions reinforced that supposition instead.

Therefore, a pragmatic plan and strong leadership for the organization were crucial to realize those ideals, and to add onto that, the Army was much too big. Concealment of acquired items was rampant, coups and revolts happened one after another, and the leaders gradually lost their control over the guild.

"And the one who came to power then was the man named Kibaou."

Yulier spoke in an unpleasant tone.

"He supported the concept of individualism from Thinker, began strengthening the structure of the organization with players of the upper rank with similar views, and changed the name of the guild to Aincrad Liberation Force. In addition, he drove the hunting down of criminals and monopolization of fields with effective rates up, through the use of an official policy. He had at least considered friendships with other guilds by defending the etiquette on hunting areas until then, but after that, he kept up the monopolization for a long period of time through multiple displays of power, sharply increasing the guild's profits, and caused the supporters of Kibaou to end up gaining political power rapidly. Recently, Thinker has been increasingly resigned to the status of a mere figurehead... while the players from the Kibaou clique have been getting carried away, starting acts of extortion under the pretense of «tax collection», even within the boundaries of towns. Yesterday, the ones who caused all of you that distressing encounter were part of those guys from that faction."

Yulier took a breath of air, drank the tea Sasha had made, and continued.

"However, even the Kibaou clique has a weakness. That is, they're hooked on nothing but the accumulation of wealth, barely continuing with the completion of the game. The belief that they are mistaking the cause for the end is becoming popular among the tail end of the players... To restrain that dissatisfaction, Kibaou recently took a reckless gamble. Within his subordinates, he assembled a party of ten of the highest levelled players, sending them to finish off the foremost boss."

Asuna unintentionally exchanged glances with Kirito. The case of the player from the Army, Colbert, who challenged the floor boss of the seventy-fourth floor, «The Gleameyes», without even proper preparations and died a tragic death found a new detail to add on to her memory.

"Regardless of how high those levels may have been, from the very start, when compared to those from the clearing group, we cannot deny our lack of competence. ...In the end, the party was eliminated, and with the worst possible result of the death of the commanding officer. Kibaou was strongly blamed for that display of recklessness. We were only a short bit away from being able to exile him, but..."

Wrinkles creased on Yulier's high nose bridge, and she bit her lips.

"Three days ago, Kibaou, took drastic measures as he was hunted down, setting a trap for Thinker. He used a corridor crystal, set to deep within the dungeon, at the exit, and Thinker ended up getting expelled instead. At that time, Thinker went without his equipment, believing in Kibaou's words, 'Let's talk while unarmed,' in a status that guarantees that one would be unable to break through the mob of monsters from the deepest section of the dungeon and return by oneself. It seemed that he didn't even carry a teleport crystal with him..."

"Th-Three days have already passed...!? In that case, Thinker-san is...?"

Towards Asuna who replied with a question, Yulier gave a slight nod.

"His name on the «Monument of Life» is still unaltered, so it seems that he managed to make it all the way to the safe zone somehow. However, as the location is still the inner portion of a considerably high levelled dungeon, we appear to be unable to take any action... As you know, messages cannot be sent within dungeons, and the guild storage cannot be accessed from inside, so we can't just send a teleport crystal in either."

Since using a corridor crystal leading right into a destination of death is a basic technique known as, «Portal PK», Thinker should naturally know about it. However, he probably did not even consider that a sub-leader of the same guild would go to that extent, even with the bitterness between them. Or perhaps, he just did not want to believe it at all.

As though she had read Asuna's thoughts, Yulier muttered, "He's just too much of a good person," with a sigh, and continued.

"...The only ones able to manipulate the proof of a guild leader, the «Scroll of Contracts», are Thinker and Kibaou, and at this rate, with Thinker not returning, the guild's personnel management and such, even the finances; it will all be left under Kibaou's control. The responsibility for not preventing Thinker from falling into the trap lies with his assistant, which would be me, and I have no choice but to go and rescue him. But I have no chance of breaking through the dungeon he is confined in with my level; neither can I call for support from the players of the «Army»."

She bit her lips tightly, before looking straight at Kirito, then Asuna.

"And at that time, I caught wind of news that an amazingly powerful pair appeared within the city, hence it is with the intention to ask for help, that I came here, as I could not just ignore the situation and do nothing. Kirito-san— Asuna-san."

Yulier bowed deeply, and spoke.

"I believe this to be extremely impudent of me to ask of this when we've just met, but please, won't you aid me in rescuing Thinker?"

Asuna stared intently at Yulier, who had ended her long story and closed her mouth.

It may be depressing to say so, but within SAO, the words of others cannot be trusted so easily. Even for a matter like this, the possibility of it being a conspiracy to lure Kirito and Asuna outside the range of the town, so as to inflict harm onto them, cannot be abandoned just yet. Normally, as long as there is sufficient knowledge about the game, one would be able to find the holes in the stories of possible liars, but unfortunately, Asuna and company are much too ignorant about the true state of affairs concerning the «Army».

Exchanging a glance with Kirito, Asuna opened her mouth to speak with care.

"—If there's something we can do, we should offer our strength— that is what I believe. But for that to happen, we would first have to do some research at least, so as to confirm your story..."

"That is— as expected, I suppose..."

Yulier gave a slight nod.

"I even realize, that this is an unreasonable request... However, it would not be unthought-of for a horizontal line to be engraved into Thinker's name on the «Monument of Life» of the Black Iron Castle any moment now..."

The silver-haired whip-user's firm eyes appeared to cloud over, swaying Asuna's feelings. She keenly felt her desire to believe. But at the same time, the experience she had gathered over these two years in this world warned her, setting off alarm bells about the danger of letting her emotions loose.

Taking a look at Kirito, he too, seemed to be lost in his thoughts once again. Those black eyes intently looking this way reflected the wavering of his heart, between the desire to help out Yulier and the concern for Asuna's health.

—It happened then. Yui, who had been silent up till then, abruptly raised her face from her cup and spoke.

"It's fine, Mama. That person, she's not lying."

Asuna was taken aback and stared hard at Yui. Putting aside the contents of her speech, it was excellent Japanese, as if the way she had faltered with her words up until yesterday was a lie.

"Yu... Yui-chan, are you able to understand something like that...?"

Having been asked the question as Asuna looked into her face, Yui gave a nod.

"Un. I can't... really put it into words, but I get it..."

Having heard those words, Kirito reached out with his right hand, ruffling Yui's head. He looked at Asuna and grinned.

"Let's just regret believing in her, instead of regret suspecting her. Let's go. We'll handle it somehow."

"You're as carefree as ever, huh."

Shaking her head as she replied, Asuna too, reached out towards Yui's hair with her hand.

"Sorry about that, Yui-chan. We will be delayed in searching for your friends for a day, but do forgive us."

She whispered in a small voice, although she was unsure if she really understood it. Yui gave a huge smile and nodded. Stroking her glossy black hair once again, Asuna turned towards Yulier and spoke, smiling.

"...We might not be of much help, but do allow us to aid you. The desire to help someone important to you; I too, understand that feeling..."

As tears welled up in Yulier's sky-blue eyes, she took a deep bow.

"Thank you... Thank you so much..."

"Let's save that for after we rescue Thinker-san."

Asuna gave yet another smile, and Sasha, who was looking over the situation in silence thus far, clapped her hands together.

"In that case, be sure to get your fill! There's still more left, so do have some too, Yulier-san."

The feeble sunlight of the early winter leaked through the treetops of the roadside trees turning a deep crimson, casting shadows upon the stone paving. Barely anyone passed through the alleys of the Starting City, and coupled with the streets that stretched out forever, the somber impression it gave off could not be denied.

Asuna, properly armed with her equipment, hastened through the roads along with Kirito, carrying Yui, under Yulier's guidance.

Asuna naturally tried to leave Yui behind in Sasha's care, but as Yui stubbornly insisted on going together, she ended up reluctantly bringing her along. Of course, a teleport crystal was prepared for her in her pocket. If the situation called for it—though it would trouble Sasha—it was arranged to allow her to retreat away from there.

"Ah, now that I think about it, you didn't mention something important yet."

Kirito called out to Yulier, who was walking in front.

"Which floor is the dungeon in question on?"

Yulier gave a simple answer.

"It's, here."

"...?"

Asuna instinctively inclined her head to the side.

"Here... eh?"

"It's, well, this Starting City's... there's a large dungeon in the underground at the central part of it. Thinker is... probably, in the deepest part of..."

"Seriously?"

Kirito spoke as though he was groaning.

"There wasn't anything like that during the beta test. What a miss..."

"The entrance to that dungeon, is at the Black Iron Castle—in other words, it's at the Army's headquarters. It does appear that it's the type of dungeon that opens up with the clearing of the upper floors, and it was only found

out around the time Kibaou came to power, with them planning to monopolize it for their own clique. It was kept a secret for quite some time, from even Thinker, and of course, myself as well..."

"So that's it. There are quite a lot of rare items that pop up only once in unexplored dungeons, after all. They must have made quite a profit from it."

"Well, that's not quite true."

Yulier's tone of voice was dyed with slight traces of pleasure.

"Despite it being on the base floor, the degree of difficulty for that dungeon was dreadfully high... Even among the base monsters there, their levels are close to those around the sixtieth floor. It seems like even the advance party led by Kibaou himself got broken up and chased around, barely escaping with their lives by teleporting out. Thanks to those recklessly used crystals, we went deep in the red and all."

"Hahaha, I see."

Yulier responded to Kirito's laugh with a smile, but soon sank into gloom.

"However, right now, that's the reason why saving Thinker is difficult. The corridor crystal that Kibaou used was made by marking a spot rather deep inside that he got through to as he ran here and there away from the monsters... Thinker is probably at the tip of that marked spot. It's not quite impossible for me to handle the monsters there if it's one-on-one, but consecutive battles would be totally hopeless. —I apologize, but the two of you will..."

"Ah, well, if it's around the sixtieth floor..."

"We should be able to handle it somehow."

Following up on Kirito's statement, Asuna nodded. For the dungeon on the sixtieth floor, a level of 70 was needed to amply clear it, but Asuna had currently reached level 87, while Kirito had easily exceeded 90. With that, it should be possible to break through the dungeon even while protecting Yui, and she released the tension in her shoulders with relief. However, Yulier continued her speech without changing her anxious-looking expression.

"...Also, there's another matter of concern. It's information gotten from the players who participated in the advance party, but deep in the dungeon... a humongous monster was sighted; something at the rank of a boss..."

"..."

Asuna exchanged glances with Kirito.

"The boss might be that one from around the sixtieth floor... How was the boss from there again?"

"Eh, well, I believe... it was something like an armored warrior formed from stone."

"Ah, that one, huh. ...It wasn't too hard, if I'm not wrong..."

Facing towards Yulier, she gave another nod.

"Well, as for that, we should probably be able to handle it as well."

"In that case, I'm relieved!"

Yulier finally slackened her jaws and continued her words while squinting, as though she was looking at something dazzling.

"That's right... The both of you have always experienced boss battles... I'm sorry, to take up your precious time..."

"No, we're on break right now, after all."

Asuna flustered, waving her hands.

As they exchanged those conversations, the form of a huge building, shining with a black luster, began to appear in the streets beyond them. It was the largest establishment of the Starting City, the «Black Iron Castle». In the hall right after entering through the main gate, the «Monument of Life», with the names of every player listed on it, was erected, and although anyone could enter up till that point, most of the deeper grounds inside were completely under the control of the Army.

Yulier did not head for the main entrance to the castle, moving around to the back. The high castle walls and the deep moat encircling it, denying intruders, continued on forever. There was absolutely no human traffic.

After walking on for several minutes, the place where Yulier came to a stop was a stairway that descended from the road, down towards somewhere

close to the water's surface of the moat. Peering in, there was a dark passage wide open on the right side at the tip of the stairs.

"We will enter the castle's sewers from here and head for the entrance to the dungeon. It might be a little dark and narrow though..."

Yulier cut off her words there, glancing at Yui, within Kirito's arms, with concern. With that, Yui scowled as though she was upset,

"Yui isn't scared!"

and insisted so. A smile unintentionally leaked from Asuna, as she looked at the situation.

To Yulier, Yui was explained with nothing more than a, "We're living together." She did not try to pry into anything beyond that, but she probably had reservations about bringing her along to the dungeon, as expected.

Asuna spoke as to alleviate her worries.

"It's alright; this child is much more alert than she appears, after all."

"Yep. She will definitely become a fine swordswoman in the future."

With Kirito's remark, Asuna exchanged glances with him and smiled, and Yulier gave a deep nod.

"Well then, let's go!"

"Nuooooo"

And the sword gripped by the right hand cut through the monster with a slash,

"Ryaaaaaaa"

And the sword gripped by the left hand blew it away with a bang.

Equipping two swords for the first time in a while, Kirito released all the energy saved up from his holiday, laying waste to the swarms of enemies without pause, one after another. Asuna, holding Yui's hand, and Yulier, gripping her metal whip, had no chance to do anything at all. Each time the groups of enemies, comprising of huge frog-type monsters covered in slime, crayfish-type monsters carrying pincers of a black sheen, and such appeared, what assaulted them with reckless fury were the swords from

the left and right, tearing through everything surrounding them, finishing the enemies off.

Asuna's mind went, "Oh, geez," but Yulier gazed upon Kirito's berserker-style with wonder, her mouth agape. It was probably a spectacle much too different from her knowledge of combat. With Yui cheering on with an innocent "Papa, do your best," the tension in the air evaporated even further.

Dozens of minutes had passed since heading from the dark and moist underground water supply, until invading this dungeon made from black stones. It was more wide, deep and filled with monsters than expected, but with Kirito breaking the game balance, swinging around his pair of swords with vigor, the two swordswomen suffered from nearly zero fatigue.

"We... Well, I'm a little sorry about this, leaving it all to you..."

Towards the apologetic-looking Yulier, with her head bowed down, Asuna replied with a wry smile.

"No, that guy's already enthralled, after all... It's fine just letting him do everything."

"Hey, what's with that, that's horrible."

Kirito, back from devastating the group, sulked as Asuna's words reached his ears.

"Want to switch, then?"

"...Ju-just a bit more."

Asuna and Yulier smiled as they met each other's glances.

After the silver-haired whip user waved her left hand, displaying the map, she pointed out the glowing point that represented a friend marker, showing Thinker's present position. As she did not have the map to the dungeon, the path towards the glowing point was blank, but they had already shortened seventy percent of the total distance.

"Thinker's position hadn't moved for several days. I believe that he should probably be in a safe area. If we're able to reach all the way there, we can just use crystals to withdraw, so... I'm sorry, I'll be counting on you for just a little longer."

Yulier lowered her head, and Kirito frantically waved his hands.

"N-No, we're doing it because we want to, and there are items dropping as well, so..."

"Oh?"

Asuna asked in return by reflex.

"Did something good drop?"

"Yup."

Kirito nimbly manipulated the window, and a dark red meat appeared from its surface with a clacking sound. Asuna's face froze, thinking about how grotesque it must feel.

"Wha... Just what is that?"

"Frog meat! You'll definitely say that its tastiness is comparable to its strangeness, so be sure to cook it later."

"I. Won't. Do it!!"

Asuna shouted out, and opened up her window as well. Accessing the inventory shared with Kirito, she dragged the character string going, «Scavenger Meat x24», and mercilessly tossed it onto the trash bin mark.

"Ah! Aaaaaa..."

Looking upon the utterly dejected-looking Kirito speaking in a bitter tone, Yulier could not help but laugh, holding onto her stomach, even as she tried to stifle it. At that moment,

"Big sis, you finally laughed!"

Yui cried out delightedly. She too, grinned broadly.

Looking at that, it took Asuna aback— recalling what had happened back then. The day before, the time Yui went into spasms was also right after the children had all laughed together, having repelled those guys from the Army. It seemed that the girl had a unique sensitivity towards the smiles of people around her. Whether that was the personality she was born with, or perhaps due to all the painful feelings she had suffered until now— Asuna instinctively held up Yui in her arms, hugging her closely. She swore in her heart, that she would always smile when beside this child.

"Well, let's go on!"

To Asuna's voice, the party stepped forth, heading ever further into the depths.

The groups of monsters mainly made up of aquatic-based creatures from the time they entered the dungeon changed into those from the specter family, such as zombies and ghosts, as they descended the stairs, sending intense chills down Asuna's heart, but Kirito's pair of swords continued slaughtering the appearing enemies in mere instants, not showing the slightest hint of hesitation.

Normally, it is not quite well-regarded for a high levelled player to go wild in a hunting field far below theirs, but there was no need to mind about that this time, as there wasn't even anyone else there. If there was time available, it would be a chance to work towards levelling up Yulier, who was content being the support, but rescuing Thinker took precedence at present.

In the two hours that passed in the blink of an eye, the distance between the current position displayed on the map, and where Thinker's location was, thought to be the safe zone, steadily narrowed down.

It was completely unknown just how many had already been downed, as Kirito's swords blew that particular black skeleton swordsman into pieces, and they finally caught sight of a passage glimmering with warm light just beyond there.

"Ah, it's the safe zone!"

As Asuna spoke, Kirito nodded as well, having confirmed with his detection skill.

"There's a player alone inside. It's safe."

"Thinker!"

Yulier shouted out and ran with her metal armor clinking, unable to hold herself back any longer. Kirito lowered his two swords and hurried behind her, along with Asuna holding onto Yui.

They ran towards the light. As they went through the road that bent to the right for several seconds, a large fork in the road, and beyond that, a small room, soon came into view.

To their eyes, accustomed to the darkness, the room was filled with light bright enough to blind them, and a single man stood in the entranceway. His face was shaded due to the backlight, but he was wildly waving his arms in their direction.

"Yurieee!!!"

The moment he confirmed the figures, the man roared out her name. Yulier waved her left hand as well, running ever quicker.

"Thinkerrr!!!"

As if his voice was mixed with tears, the man's cry—

"Don't come any closer!! That road is...!!!"

On hearing that, Asuna slowed down her pace, startled. But it did not seem to have reached Yulier's ears. She was rushing straight towards the room.

In that moment.

Several meters before the room, in the blind spot on the right side, on the path intersecting the road that the three were running through, an unexpected single yellow cursor appeared. Asuna promptly checked the name. The display was «The Fatal-scythe»—

With the meaning of a scythe that decides fate, it had the defining "The" attached to it. The proof of a boss monster.

"Nooo!! Yulier-san, get back!!!"

Asuna screamed. The yellow cursor smoothly moved towards the left, closing in towards the intersection of the crossroads. At this rate, Yulier would run into it at the crossing. There was barely any time left.

"Ku-!!!"

Suddenly, Kirito who had been running on Asuna's left seemed to— have vanished. In reality, he had dashed off at a tremendous speed. The surrounding walls quivered with the sound of that impact.

He travelled several meters with a force at the level of teleportation, and as Kirito held onto Yulier from behind her with his right hand, he thrust the sword in his left into the bedrock with all his might. A tremendous metallic sound. Countless sparks. Performing an urgent brake that was able to burn the very air, in the space in front of the pair that barely managed to stop

before the crossroads, the ground roared as it tremored, as a gigantic black shadow crossed.

The yellow cursor that lunged into the passage on the left stopped after roughly ten meters. The monster of unknown stature coolly changed its direction and appeared to charge in once again.

Kirito released Yulier, and withdrawing the sword he pierced into the floor, he jumped into the left passage. Asuna followed behind frantically.

Shaking Yulier, who had fallen due to shock, back to her senses, she pushed her towards the opposite side of the crossing. Letting Yui down from her arms and entrusting her with Yulier, Asuna left a short call.

"Please retreat into the safe zone with this child!"

The whip-user nodded with her face white, and having confirmed that she carried Yui towards the room, Asuna drew her rapier as she turned to the left.

The sight of Kirito's back, staying still in his dual blades stance, entered her vision. What laid further in— was a being of two and a half meters, a humanoid silhouette clad in flapping black robes.

Within the hood, the arms peeking out from the cuffs, were dark, corporeal and wriggling as they coiled about. Inside its murky face, all that occupied it was a pair of energetic eyeballs, their blood vessels visible, looking down at the couple. It wielded a huge black scythe in its right hand. From the edge of that cruel curve, viscid red blots trickled down, drop by drop. As a whole, it had a figure just like that of the supposed god of death.

The death god's eyeballs swirled around, and looked straight at Asuna. At that moment, chills ran through her entire body, as though her heart was gripped by pure fear.

But its level should not be too much to deal with.

With that thought in her head, the moment she readied her rapier once again, Kirito spoke coarsely, standing in front of her.

"Asuna, get those three at the safe zone and escape with a crystal now."

"Eh...?"

"This guy's bad. Even my identification skill couldn't find any data on it. In terms of power, it probably ranks among the ninetieth floors."

"...?"

Asuna lost her breath and stiffened up as well. Even in those moments, the death god gradually moved through the air, closing in on the pair.

"I'll stall for some time, so hurry up and get out of here!!"

"Ki-Kirito too, we should both..."

"I'll go after you! Hurry...!!"

Even though the teleport crystal is a last resort measure for retreating, it is not an all-powerful tool. Between gripping the crystal, designating the destination, and actually completing the teleportation, there is a time lag of several seconds. If one were to receive an attack from a monster in that period of time, the teleportation will be cancelled. When the chain of command breaks down in parties, with people retreating purely to suit their own convenience popping up, the reason why the rest become casualties, unable to even stall for enough time to teleport, is due to this.

Asuna was at a loss. Even if the four of them teleported first, with Kirito's running ability, he might be able to outrun the boss to reach the safe zone. However, the charging speed shown by the boss earlier was truly terrifying. If perhaps—she were to escape first, and after that, he doesn't appear. That was a thought she could not bear.

Asuna took a glance at the depths of the road on the right.

—Sorry, Yui-chan. Even though I said that we'll be together...

Whispering so within her heart, she shouted out.

"Yulier-san, I'll leave Yui to you! Please escape together, you three!"

Yulier shook her head, her expression frozen.

"I won't allow it... something like that..."

"Hurry!!"

It was then. The death god, swaying its wielded scythe, started charging with startling vigor, miasma spreading from the hem of its robes.

Kirito crossed the swords in his hands, taking up an imposing stance before Asuna. Asuna frantically clung onto that back, meeting Kirito's two swords with the one in her right hand. The death god, without a care for the three swords, swung the scythe down, aiming above the couple's heads.

A red flash. An impact.

Asuna felt herself spinning round and round. First, she was thrown to the ground, then she crashed into the ceiling on the rebound, before falling back down to the ground once again. Her breathing stopped, and her field of vision began to darken.

Her consciousness hazy, she checked Kirito's and her own HP bars, both of them had half shaved away from that single hit. The merciless yellow indicator conveyed the inability to survive the next attack. She had to get back up. That was what she thought, but her body couldn't move—

—And, at that moment.

Short step after short step, she heard those soft footsteps close to her ears. Shifting her sight, bewildered, childlike steps, like those of a kitten, advancing forward without a care for the impending danger entered her vision.

Slender hands and feet. Long, black hair. It was Yui, who should have been in the safe zone. Possessing a gaze without the slightest trace of fear, she stared straight at the gigantic god of death.

"Idiot!! Hurry up, get away!!"

Frantically struggling to move his upper body, Kirito cried out. The death god held its scythe aloft with deliberate motions once more. If she was dragged into an attack of that range, Yui's HP would certainly be blown away. Asuna too, tried to move her mouth. But with her lips stiffened up, she was unable to utter a single word.

But in the next moment, something unbelievable happened.

"It's alright, Papa, Mama."

Along with those words, Yui's body gently floated into the air.

It was not a jump. Moving as though she flapped invisible wings, she came to a complete stop at a height of two meters. She softly hung her far too small right hand in the air.

"Nooo...! Get away!! Get away, Yui-chan!!"

As if to erase Asuna's screams, the death god's scythe was relentlessly swung down, drawing a line of dark-red light. The atrocious pointed edge came within reach of Yui's pure white palm—

Right before it came into contact with her, it was hindered by a vivid purple barrier, and repulsed with a large noise. The system tag that floated before Yui's palm caused Asuna to stare in astonishment.

[Immortal Object], that was surely what was written there. Immortality— an attribute that no player should possess.

The black death god spun its eyeballs about, as though it was bewildered. Immediately following that, a phenomenon to further surprise Asuna happened.

"Gouu!!," along with this sound, crimson flames came forth, coiling around, with Yui's right hand as their core. The flames scattered widely for an instant, before immediately condensing, and started to join together into a long and narrow form. As one looked on, the figure changed towards that of a huge sword. A blade, sparkling in the shades of the blaze, emerged from within the flames, extending out endlessly.

The greatsword that appeared in Yui's right hand was of a length that easily exceeded the girl's height. Radiance from the metal that seemed to be on the verge of melting illuminated the pathway. As though rousing the flames of the sword, the bulky winter clothes worn on Yui's form burnt down in an instant. From beneath that, the white one-piece dress the girl had on at first appeared. Strangely enough, even as the flames winded around the one-piece dress, as well as that long, black hair, there seemed to be absolutely no effect on them.

She casually spun the sword that exceeded her height around, once—

Without showing a hint of hesitation, Yui challenged the death god as she drew strokes of flames.

Despite its actions being governed by nothing more than simple algorithms from the system, within the boss monster's bloodshot eyes, Asuna believed she saw them dyed in a distinct color of fear.

Draped in the swirls of flames, Yui charged through the air with a deafening roar. The death god raised the scythe before itself and assumed a defensive stance, as though it was afraid of the girl, far smaller than itself. And approaching forth, Yui swung the huge, blazing sword straight down with all her might.



The blade, exuding intense flames, collided into the horizontal scythe's handle. For an instant, the pair's movements ceased.

Without even a moment to think, Yui's flaming sword moved once more. Like the metal was ablaze with withering amounts of heat, the radiant blade ate into the scythe's grip bit by bit. With enough force to tear apart everything but Yui's long hair and one-piece dress, as well as the death god's robes, it flickered behind them, scattering large sparks at times, lighting up the interior of the dungeon, dyeing the area orange.

Before long—

Along with an explosive sound, "Gou," the death god's scythe was finally cut in half. Immediately following that, as the energy accumulated thus far was unleashed, the greatsword turned into a pillar of flame, striking straight into the middle of the boss's face.

"—h...!!"

Asuna and Kirito squinted their eyes and shielded their face on reflex, reacting to the excessively strong force from a scorching ball of fire that appeared in that moment. At the same time Yui swung the sword straight down, the fireball blew up, swallowing up the death god's form in crimson swirls as it streamed deeper into the passage. Hidden within that thunderous roar, a faint shriek of death and agony echoed.

When they opened their eyes, they immediately closed them for an instant due to how dazzling the flames were. The figure of the boss monster was no more. Small fires swayed about, left behind here and there on the road, making cracking noises. And in the center of it all, Yui stood still by herself, looking downcast. The blazing sword which stood in the ground, dissolved and crumbled down into nothing as it exuded flames just like the time it materialized.

Asuna rose up, finally having regained the strength in her body, slowly standing up by using her rapier as a support. Kirito too, stood up shortly after. The couple approached the girl with unsteady steps.

"Yui... chan..."

Asuna called out with a coarse voice, and the girl turned back without a sound. Her small lips showed a smile, but in those large jet black eyes, many tears were swelling up.

Yui looked up at Asuna and Kirito as she quietly spoke.

"Papa... Mama... I, remember everything now..."

The safe zone of the deepest part of the Black Iron Castle's underground labyrinth was shaped as a perfect square. There was only a single entrance, and in the middle of it, a smooth, gleaming, black stone cube acting as a table was positioned.

Asuna and Kirito looked on at Yui, sitting on the stone table, looking small and quiet, in silence. Yulier and Thinker were asked to escape first, so the three were by themselves now.

"My memory recovered"; with just those words, Yui went through several minutes without speaking at all. That expression seemed sorrowful somehow, as though she was hesitant to speak, but Asuna gathered her resolve and asked.

"Yui-chan... Did you remember...? Everything up till now..."

Yui still continued looking downcast, but finally gave a nod. With an expression like a mix between smiling and crying, she raised her small lips.

"Yes... I will, explain everything— Kirito-san, Asuna-san."

The moment she heard that polite form of speaking, Asuna's chest tightened with desolate expectations. A suffocating belief that something would be ending.

Within the square room, Yui's words gently started flowing forth.

"This world named, «Sword Art Online», is managed by a single large system. The system's name is «Cardinal». That is, the way this world is managed is based on its judgment. In the first place, Cardinal was designed to not require maintenance from humans. With two core programs doing mutual error correction on the other, and in addition, countless numbers of lower program bundles, they regulate the whole of this world... The AI for monsters and NPCs, the balancing of the rates of items and the currency, anything and everything is managed by the cluster of programs under the command of Cardinal. —However, there was one thing that could be entrusted to nothing but humans. Trouble originating in the players' mental state; that was the only thing that could be settled by none other than humans themselves... and for that purpose, dozens of staff members should have been prepared."

"GM..."

Kirito spoke with a sigh.

"Yui, in short, are you saying that you're a gamemaster...? A staff from Argus...?"

After spending several seconds in silence, Yui softly shook her head.

"...When the developers of Cardinal entrusted even the care of players to the system, they ran a trial of a certain program. Using a feature unique to the Nerve Gear, it monitored the emotions of players in detail, and appeared at the side of players found to have problems to hear them out... «Mental Health — Counselling Program», MHCP version 1, codename, «Yui». That would be me."

Asuna's breath was taken away with how much of a shock it was. She was unable to apprehend just what had been said right away.

"Program...? Do you mean an AI...?"

She asked in a low voice. Yui gave a nod, a dejected smile on her face.

"So as to not discomfort players, I was given an emotion imitation function. —It's fake, all of it... even these tears... I'm sorry, Asuna-san..."

Large tears spilled from Yui's eyes, becoming particles of light, and dissipated. Asuna took a single, soft step towards Yui. She reached out her hand, but Yui faintly shook her head. As if— she was unqualified to receive Asuna's embrace.

Still incapable of believing the situation, Asuna forced out her words.

"But... But, losing your memories...? Can something like that happen to an AI...?"

"...Two years ago... The day the official service started..."

Yui lowered her eyes, and continued her explanation.

"Although I am unaware of the complete details of what exactly happened as well, Cardinal handed down an unplanned order to me. A complete prohibition from interfering with all players... Unpermitted to come into any tangible contact with them, I reluctantly continued with nothing but the monitoring of the condition of the players' mental health."

Asuna reacted reflexively; she guessed that «unplanned order» was due to the manipulation done by the only GM of SAO, Kayaba Akihiko. Yui, who was probably in the dark about him, moved her lips once more, her face distorted in sorrow.

"That situation— was simply the worst... Practically all of the players were taken over by negative emotions such as fear, despair and rage most of the time; at times, there were even some that fell into madness. I continued looking into the hearts of those people. Originally, I would not have been able to stop myself from going straight up to those players, listening to their stories and settling their problems... but there was no means of coming into contact with them from my position... With that contradiction of having the sense of duty, yet the lack of authority to do so, I was gradually flooded with errors, and broke down..."

At the bottom of the silent underground labyrinth, Yui's delicate voice rippled out, like a trembling thread of silver. Asuna and Kirito could not help but listen attentively without uttering a single word.

"One day, when I did my usual monitoring, I noticed a pair with mental parameters that differed largely from those of other players. I had never encountered those brain patterns that I picked up until then. Joy... peace... but not just those... Just what are these emotions; thinking that, I continued to monitor those two. Mysterious desires sprouted within me, as I pried into their conversations and actions. No such routine should have existed, but... I wanted to get closer to those two... in an intimate setting, I wanted to converse with them directly... With the wish to be nearer, even the slightest bit more, I wandered about daily, manifesting at the system console closest to the player home that the couple lived in. I believe I must have been considerably broken down at that point in time..."

"And that is, the forest of the twenty-second floor...?"

Yui gently nodded.

"Yes. Kirito-san, Asuna-san... I had always wanted... to meet with the two of you... In that forest, the moment I saw the two of you... I felt extremely happy... It was strange; it's not possible that I could think of something like that... I am nothing but a mere program..."

Overflowing with tears, Yui closed her mouth. Asuna was stricken with indescribable feelings, grasping her hands tightly before her chest.

"Yui-chan... you are a true AI, aren't you? So you possess actual intelligence, don't you..."

As she said so in a whisper, Yui inclined her head slightly and replied.

"I.. don't understand... Just exactly, what had happened to me..."

At that moment, Kirito, who had kept his silence till then, took a step forward.

"Yui is no longer a program operated by the system. Therefore, you should be able to voice out your own wishes."

And he spoke in a soft tone.

"What do you wish for, Yui?"

"I... I want..."

Yui stretched out her slender arms towards the couple strongly.

"To always be together... Papa... Mama...!"

Without even wiping away the tears flowing over her face, Asuna rushed over to Yui, tightly holding onto her small frame.

"We will always be together, Yui-chan."

Shortly after, Kirito too, wrapped his arms around Yui and Asuna.

"Aah... Yui is our child. Let's go home. We'll all live together... forever..."

However— within Asuna's breast, Yui softly shook her head.

"Eh..."

"It's... too late..."

Kirito asked, bewildered.

"Why's that... what's too late..."

"The reason why I have regained my memories... is because I've touched that stone."

Yui looked towards the center of the room, pointing at the black cube stored there with her small hand.

"When Asuna-san pushed me away into this safe zone earlier, I touched that stone by coincidence, and understood. That is not just a decorative object... It's a console installed there in the case that a GM requires urgent access."

As though there was an order of some sort within Yui's words, several lines of light burst towards the black stone. Immediately, with a fading beeping sound, a pale blue holo-keyboard rose to its surface.

"I believe that the boss monster from earlier was stationed here to keep players away. I accessed the system using this console, and eliminated the monster with the «Object Eraser» summon. At that time, with Cardinal's error correction ability, my damaged language faculty was restored, but... at the same time, Cardinal also found out about me, who was left alone until then. Right now, the core system is scanning over my program. It will conclude with the answer that I am a foreign entity, and I'll most likely be erased. I already... do not have much time left..."

"That... That is..."

"Can't something be done about it? If we get away from this place..."

Yui merely gave a wry smile towards the pair's words. Tears flowed down Yui's white cheeks once again.

"Papa, Mama, thank you. This would be our farewell."

"No way! I don't want something like that!!"

Asuna desperately screamed.

"This is just the beginning!! From now on, happily, together with everyone... living peacefully with each other..."

"In that darkness... During that long suffering where I did not even know the end of, the existence of Papa and Mama was my only solace."

Yui looked straight at Asuna. Faint light began enveloping that body.

"Yui, don't go!!"

Kirito held on to Yui's hand. Yui's small fingers gently caught hold of Kirito's.

"When I'm with Papa and Mama, everyone is able to smile... I was very happy for that. This is my request; that from now on too... in my place... help everyone out... give them joy..."

Yui's black hair and one-piece dress began disintegrating away into transient dispersing particles of light, much like morning dew. Yui's smiling face slowly became transparent. Her presence faded away.

"No! I don't want this!! If Yui-chan isn't here, I won't be able to smile!!"

Covered in the expanding light, Yui smiled sweetly. She caressed Asuna's cheek with her hand, on the verge of disappearing.

—Mama, do smile...

As a weak voice reverberated in Asuna's mind, an overwhelming dazzling light scattered out; as that too faded, there was nothing within Asuna's arms.

"Uwaaaaaa!!"

Raising her voice uncontrollably, Asuna fell to her knees. Kneeling atop the stone paving, she cried loudly like a child. The tears spilled onto the ground, drop after drop, mixed together with the grains of light left behind by Yui, vanishing away.

## Part 4

As if the chill till yesterday was a lie, a warm, gentle breeze blew over the lawn. Perhaps attracted by the merrymaking, several small birds descended onto a branch of the garden tree, appearing to look over the humans with great interest.

A garden party was hosted without care for the season at the vast front yard of Sasha's church, with the big table from the dining hall moved and set there. Food was taken out from a large grill like magic, raising a grand roar of joy from the children.

"To think that something this delicious... was actually in this world..."

The chief executive of the «Army» who was rescued just the previous night, Thinker, bit into the barbecue that Asuna had exhibited her talents in, as he spoke with awe. Beside him, Yulier looked over the situation with a smile. She had the presence of a cool-headed female warrior on first impression, but when she was beside Thinker, she resembled nothing more than a cheerful young wife.

And as for Thinker, although there wasn't much time to get a good look at him yesterday, when sitting at the same table like this instead, he had a character that gave off an aura of gentleness, very much unlike what the top of a huge organization would be thought to be.

With a stature of a degree slightly taller than Asuna, he was evidently shorter than Yulier. His somewhat stocky body was clad in plain clothes, and he did not have a single weapon on hand. Beside him, Yulier too, was not in her Army uniform style today.

Thinker accepted the wine bottle Kirito offered into his glass, and apparently not for the first time, he gave a firm bow.

"Asuna-san, Kirito-san. We are truly obliged to you this time. Just how can I thank you..."

"No, I'm quite indebted to «MMO Today» on the other side, after all."

Kirito answered as he smiled.

"That's a nostalgic name."

A broad smile showed on Thinker's round face upon hearing that.

"At that time, with the burden that updating daily was, I thought that I shouldn't even bother doing a news site, but when compared to being a guild leader, it certainly was slightly easier. I would have been better off running a newspaper stand here too, huh."

Gentle laughter streamed out from the table.

"And well... how did things go with the «Army»...?"

Asuna enquired, and Thinker changed his expression.

"Kibaou and his followers were expelled. I really should have done that much earlier... With my personality of being bad at arguments, the situation kept getting worse... —I even thought about disbanding the Army."

Asuna and Kirito rapidly opened their eyes in surprise.

"You... must have pondered over that for quite a bit."

"The Army had become too huge... I'll be breaking down the guild and from that, creating a more peaceful organization for mutual aid once again. Breaking it down and abandoning all of it is just irresponsible after all."

Yulier softly held Thinker's hand and continued in his stead.

"—We believe we will be distributing the assets that the Army had accumulated thus far to not just the members, but equally among all of the inhabitants of this city as well. We've caused such trouble up till now after all... Sasha-san, we're really sorry."

Yulier and Thinker suddenly gave a deep bow, causing Sasha's eyes to blink with surprise within her glasses. She frantically waved her hands in front of her face.

"No, that's too much. The children have received help from the good folk from the Army in the field too, after all."

With Sasha's candid denial, the place was filled with gentle laughter once more.

"Well, putting that aside..."

Tilting her head, Yulier spoke.

"The girl from yesterday, Yui-chan... how has she been...?"

Asuna met glances with Kirito, and replied with a smile.

"Yui has... returned to her home..."

She softly moved the finger on her right hand to her breast. There, a thin necklace, which had not been there till yesterday, gleamed. At the tip of the exquisite silver chains, a pendant, of silver as well, hung down, with a large clear gem shining within it. Brushing the teardrop-shaped jewel gently, a slight warmth seemed to have spread to her fingertips.

At that time—

After Yui was covered in light and vanished, beside Asuna, her tears falling endlessly as she knelt on the stone paving, Kirito gave a sudden shout.

"Cardinal!!"

Raising his moist face, Kirito gazed at the ceiling of the room and screamed.

"Don't you dare think that it'll always... go as you like!!"

Firmly pulling himself together, he abruptly jumped at the black console in the middle of the room. He dexterously struck at the holo-keyboard still displayed. Her surprise pushing away her sorrow for just an instant, Asuna cried out as she looked on in wonder.

"Ki-Kirito-kun... What are...!?"

"If it's still... If it's still now, I might be able to intrude into the system with a GM account..."

Before Kirito's eyes, continuing to hit the keys as he muttered, a huge window appearance with a beep, and the radiance from the strings of characters rapidly scrolling past illuminated the room. While Asuna watched over him dumbfounded, Kirito entered in several more commands in succession. A small progress bar window appeared, and at the moment the horizontal bar reached all the way to the right end—

The whole of the console made from the black rock suddenly flashed bluish-white, and immediately following that, Kirito was sent flying with an explosive sound.

"Ki-Kirito-kun!!"

Panicking, she inched up to him, fallen onto the floor.

Shaking his head as he pulled his upper body up, Kirito gave a thin smile within his haggard expression; he faced towards Asuna and extended his closed right hand. Not understanding what was going on, Asuna followed suit, holding out her hand.

What had fallen from Kirito's hand into Asuna's was a large crystal made in the shape of a tear. In the middle of the elaborately faceted stone, thump, thump, a white light was blinking.

"Th-This is...?"

"...Before the root authorization activated by Yui was cut off, I desperately tried to disconnect Yui's program source from the system, and converted it into an object... Within that, Yui's heart is there..."

After having said just that, Kirito tumbled onto the ground, as though he ran out of energy, and closed his eyes.

"Yui-chan... you're... in there, huh... My... Yui-chan..."

Once again, her tears poured out endlessly. Within that blurred light, as if to answer Asuna, from the center of the crystal, it twinkled with a single strong thump.

They reluctantly waved towards Sasha, Yulier, Thinker, and the children, and the cool wind, infused with the scent of the forest, greeted Asuna and Kirito as they returned to the twenty-second floor from the teleport gate. Though it was a mere three day trip, it felt much longer than that, and Asuna took a deep breath of air.

What a vast world—

Asuna thought about this mysterious floating world once more. On each and every one of these countless layers, there were people living on them, passing each day with tears and laughter. No, painful events were likely to be more common for most of those people. But still, everyone continued fighting their own battles day after day.

The place where I should be...

Asuna gazed over the path leading to their home, then looked up at the base of the floor above.

—Let's return to the frontlines, she suddenly thought.

In the near future, I cannot help but take up my sword once again and return to my own battlefield. I do not know how much longer it will take, but I will fight until this world is finished, to let everyone show their true smiles once again. To grant happiness to everyone— That was what Yui had wished for.

"Hey, Kirito-kun."

"Hmm?"

"If the game is cleared and this world is gone, what will happen to Yui-chan?"

"Aah... Well, it might be stretching the capacity a little. I've converted her to a part of environmental data for the client program and saved her into my Nerve Gear's local memory. On the other side, it might be quite difficult to unpack it as Yui... but it should be possible somehow."

"I see."

Asuna turned her body about and hugged Kirito tightly.

"Well then, let's be sure to meet up with Yui-chan again on the other side. Our very first child."

"Yeah. Definitely."

Asuna looked down at the glittering crystal in between the couple's chests. Mama, do your best... She seemed to hear that faint voice from deep in her ears.

(End)

# Red-nosed Reindeer (Aincrad 46th Floor, December 2023)

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## Part 1

«Vorpal Strike» flashed through the darkness, and with its blood colored light two giant insect monsters' HP went to zero.

Confirming with my peripheral vision that the polygons had scattered, I withdrew my sword just as I unfroze, and turned around to block an attack from a big, sharp jaw. I then used the same «Sword Skill» to finish it off; it made a Giii cry before tilting backwards and dying.

This heavy single-handed attack skill first appeared in my list just three days ago, when my «Single-handed Sword Skill» reached level 950, and it was surprisingly convenient. Even though the skill has such a long cool-down player freeze period, its reach is double that of the actual blade; and the fact that its power is comparable to a two-handed heavy pole-arm is more than enough to make up for its shortcomings. Of course, if used in battle against other players, they would read the timing immediately. But the simple movements of the AI monsters cannot counter it. You can simply spam it and blow away groups of enemies with deep red light effects.

Having said that, after continuously battling for an hour under this weak torch light, I did indeed feel my concentration waning. I can no longer react and counter their big, biting jaws or acid mucus as well as earlier. Though they attack in large numbers, these monsters are not small-fry. This habitat is only three floors below the front line on the 49th floor, and these are very powerful monsters. Even though this is within the safety margin when considering level differences, if a massive swarm were to attack and surround me, my HP would quickly go down to the yellow zone.

To brave these dangers and come to a floor that has already been cleared, there could only be one reason. This place is the most efficient way to earn experience points out of all the currently known training locations. These giant ants that come from caves around the cliff here have high attack power, but their HP and defense are both very low. As long as you can continue to avoid their attacks, you can quickly take down a lot of these monsters. But as mentioned earlier, once under attack and surrounded, you may not even be able to hold your ground, thereby leading to death, so this area cannot be seen as a suitable training zone for solo players. Because this is such a popular place, every party is only allowed one hour to hunt. I was the only solo player there. Even now, there are familiar faces from various guilds lined up at the valley entrance. There should be a row of bored expressions that look as though they were stamped on. If it were

just impatience, that would be fine. But strongly team spirited players thought of me as the "Strongest Idiot" or the "Anomic Beater" – but, of course I didn't know about that.

My left side timer display showed 57 minutes. I decided to finish up after clearing the next wave of monsters. I took a big breath and waited, in order to squeeze out every last bit of concentration.

As ants approached from both left and right, I faced towards the one on the right, and threw a dagger to stop its movement before killing the one on the left with the triple attack skill «Sharpnail». As I turned around, I used «Vorpal Strike» to cut towards the big open jaws of another ant. During my skill cool-down, I used the glove on my left hand to wipe off the green acid that had hit me. With a jiyuu sound my HP bar lowered, and then I kicked off the ground and jumped high. In midair, I cut apart the weakest part of the ant's belly and killed it. For the last two, I used half of the longest chain skill I know, a six-hit chain, to defeat them. Before the next set of ants appeared from their hives, I suddenly dashed away.

After running the thirty meters of the ant valley in five seconds, I rolled out of the small entrance before finally releasing my breath. Gasping for fresh air, I wondered if this pain was just mental or if my real body also stopped breathing. In any case, I felt my stomach cramp up, and unable to bear this degree of nausea, I dropped like a rag onto the frozen winter ground.

The sound of many footsteps reached my ears as I lay on the ground. Even though these are people I know, I can't even say hello to them. Feebly waving my right hand to bid them onward, I then heard a rough voice and a big sigh.

"My level and yours have already grown apart, so I won't join in the action today. Listen up. Don't let the circle formation collapse, and constantly be mindful of the people around you. Make sure that you don't act shy if you encounter anything dangerous, just shout to me for help. And also, flee immediately when the queen comes out."

After receiving their leader's directive, six or seven people answered with a "Yes!" or "Ho!", and the rustling footsteps gradually moved away. I breathed heavily a few times, and after finally getting my breath under control, I propped myself up with my right hand and leaned on a nearby tree.

"Catch!"

I gratefully caught the healing potion, flicked the cork open with my thumb, and drank it greedily. Even though the taste carried a hint of bitter lemon juice, I thought it was delicious. I tossed the empty bottle to the ground, watched it emit a small red light as it disappeared, and looked up.

Klein, who was the leader of the guild «Fuurinkazan» that I had met at the beginning of this death game SAO, still wearing his vulgar bandana, opened the mouth that was above his scruffy beard and said:

"Kirito, no matter how you put it, this is more than a little absurd. Just when did you come here today?"

"Eh... around 8 p.m."

After I replied in a hoarse voice, Klein showed an exaggerated expression of dissatisfaction.

"Oi, oi, it's already two in the morning, you've been here for six hours. At this kind of dangerous training zone, if you use up your strength it will be an instant death."

"It's fine. I can rest for up to two hours when waiting."

"If nobody comes then you plan to keep on fighting!"

"That's exactly why I chose this particular time to come. If I came during the day then I might have to wait five or six hours."

Klein mixed the sound of being flabbergasted with the phrase "You idiot". He then unhooked his katana from his waist, and sat down heavily in front of me.

"...well, regarding your strength, from the first day of SAO I understood it without a doubt... what's your level at now?"

To be able to keep secret stats such as the level is a player's lifeline. To not ask is therefore an unspoken rule in SAO. But up till now there's been no reason to hide it from Klein, so I answered honestly.

"Today I got to level 69."

The hand rubbing his chin stopped suddenly, and the eyes that were half-covered by the bandana opened wide in shock.

"...hey, are you for real? Since when were you ten levels higher than me – and, I don't understand it. Lately your leveling speed has been too unusual.

You must have been training even during the time of day when the training areas are sparsely populated with any players. Why do you have to go this far? I don't want to hear any of that....."for clearing the game". Even if you become stronger by yourself, the clearing pace will still be determined by strong guilds like KoB."

"Don't mind me; I have become a level-aholic. Just getting experience points makes me feel good."

Seeing me say that with a shameful smile, Klein countered by putting on a serious expression.

"Don't joke around... even I know how exhausting it is to grind like this. To play solo is incredibly taxing on the mind...even if your level is approaching 70, to be alone in this area is definitely not safe. You want to take risks, but you must have a limit too. What's the point of leveling in a place like this where you can die at any moment?"

Fuurinkazan is a guild with a core of Klein's friends from before SAO. Its members are a gang that dislike unnecessary meddling and, its leader, Klein, is no exception.

This guy is a good person, but for this kind of man to be concerned to this extent about an anomie beater like me, I'm afraid it might be because he must, for I can understand what his reason is. To help Klein, who isn't very good with words, I opened my mouth with a smile.

"It's fine, you don't need to pretend to be worried anymore. You want to know if my target is the Flag Mob, right?"

Flag Mob is set up to be a monster for quest completion. It will spawn either once every few days or sometimes hours, but once in a while a unit will spawn that is very close to the Boss Monster, so of course its strength is no joke. Thus, to defeat it, players will usually form parties as big as the ones with the Boss as the target.

Klein bluntly revealed a hard expression and rubbed his jaw.

"...I wasn't particularly trying to find that out..."

"You don't have to hide it anymore. The fact that you bought information regarding my purchase of intelligence on the Christmas Boss from Argo...this information I also bought from her."

"Say what?!"

Klein opened his eyes wide and was speechless.

"That Argo... her nickname, Rat, is not just for show."

"That girl would sell any information, even her own stats. Anyways, we know that each other's target is the Christmas Boss, and I've already bought all the current information that can be acquired from an NPC. So, you should know that I will earn experience points like this indefinitely and no matter what kind of advice is given I will not have a reason to stop."

"Ah... my bad. That is something I would reject too."

Klein removed his hand from his chin and scratched his head, continuing.

"It's 5 days until Christmas eve... every guild is the same, they all want to increase their combat ability before the appearance of the Boss, even if only a little. But in this kind of freezing night, idiots who lock themselves up in training areas are rare. Fortunately, our guild has almost ten people, we would have good chances even if our target was the Boss. You know, since it's a «Once a Year» big Flag Mob, this is not something you can hunt alone.

"....."

Unable to object, I looked down at the light brown, dry wild grass.

One year after SAO started, before the second Christmas, a rumor began to spread throughout Aincrad. A month ago, NPCs on every floor started to talk about the same quest.

It is said that during the Month of the Holly<sup>[3]</sup>, that is, midnight on December 24th, in some forest under the branches of a huge tree, the legendary monster «Nicholas the Renegade»<sup>[4]</sup> will appear. If you can defeat it, you will get all the treasure from the big sack it carries on its back.

Even for strong guilds that always only go after dungeons, this time they showed big interest. They understand that treasure, money and rare weapons will help a lot during Floor Boss fights. If we say that this is the SAO system, which has thus far only taken things from players, giving good-hearted Christmas presents, then how could anyone not accept?

But a solo player like me had, at first, no interest in this rumor. Without even Klein saying it, I already knew that this opponent was not a match for a mere single player. And besides, with the money I get from game-clearing, I could even buy a house if I wanted to. Most importantly, I

don't want to, as a result of fighting the Flag Mob that everybody wants to fight, become famous, and get unnecessary attention.

But two weeks ago – my feelings made a sudden 180 degree turn after hearing an NPC's information. After that, I came to this popular hunting ground every day, under the laughter of others, and leveled like crazy.

Klein, who has been keeping quiet with me, said in a low voice:

"So it's related to that information after all – The «Resurrection Item»."

"...Ah."

Now that the conversation has gone this far, there's no need to hide it anymore. After I calmly admitted it, I sighed numerous times which I couldn't keep track of, and squeezed out the words.

"I understand your feelings...I never thought there would actually be such a dream item. «Nicholas's bag contains a legendary item that can bring the dead back to life.» ...but...like most people, I think that was just a lie. Or rather than call it a lie, I mean it might be a left over speech for NPCs for when SAO was just an ordinary VRMMO...that is, originally, this item would have revived people without the conditions of the «Death Penalty». But, the SAO now has no such thing. There is only one penalty, and that is the player's life. I don't want to recall that event, but this was said first day on the clearing by that Kayaba fellow."

I recall the incident's first day tutorial by Akihiko's fake GM in that clearing and what he said. A player whose HP becomes zero will disappear from this server, never to return to their physical body.

I don't feel that speech was a lie, but...even so...

"There's nobody that can confirm, that the death in this world is equivalent to the real thing."

I said these words as if I meant to argue. Just then, Klein wrinkled his nose and struck down my words:

"We're going to die and return to the other side actually alive, and Kayaba will face us and tell us «I lied» ? Stop it, this question was resolved a year ago. If it's this kind of sick joke, then just pull down all the players' Nerve Gear, and this incident will be over with. Since we can't do that, this death game is serious. When HP becomes zero, the Nerve Gear will become a microwave oven and fry your brain. If it isn't that, then the people who were

killed by those bastards or monsters, who cried "I don't want to die" as they disappeared, what did all of it mean?"

"Shut up!"

Shouting loud enough to surprise myself, I interrupted Klein's speech.

"If you really think that I would not even understand this kind of thing, then I have nothing to say to you... Indeed, Kayaba did say that on the first day, but, a while back, even the leader of the game-clearers on the front lines, the leader of KoB Heathcliff said this: as long as there is even a one percent chance of saving the life of a comrade, then we should do our best to pursue that chance, and those who cannot do this don't deserve to form any party. Even though I don't like that man, what he says is right. I'm currently pursuing that chance. Suppose that those who die in this world have neither returned to the real world, nor have truly died, and instead were transferred to some sort of reserved area, waiting for the final outcome of this game. Then, we have established a reason for the «Resurrection Item»."

With a long-windedness rarely seen of me, I put forth this scenario that I only just created to support me. Klein put away his anger, and instead looked at me with pity.

"Is that so?"

The sound he emitted just now was completely different from before, very calm.

"Kirito...you still haven't forgotten about it, huh, that your last guild... And it's nearly been half a year since then..."

I turned my head, and spat out words to defend myself.

"It should be said, how could I have forgotten after just half a year...everybody died, except for me..."

"It was called «Black Cats of the Full Moon» right? They weren't even a game-clearing guild, yet still went to a place close to the front lines, and in the end some thieves caused an alarm trap. That was not your fault, and no one would blame you for that. Instead, you would be praised for being able to survive."

"It's not like that...it was my fault. Whether it's stopping them from going to the front line, telling them to ignore the treasure, or making sure everyone

escaped as soon as the alarm went off; all of this I should have been able to do."

—If I didn't hide my level of skill from my companions. The pain that came from not telling Klein this truth was relentlessly biting my chest. Before the katana-user said any words of comfort uncharacteristic of him, I forced myself to finish the rest of my words:

"Indeed, there might not even be a one percent chance of it. But whether it's the probability of my finding the Christmas Boss, of defeating it alone, of the Resurrection item existing, or of the dead's consciousnesses having been preserved...all of these like finding a grain of sand in a desert. However...however, it is not zero. Since it's not zero, I have to put in my best effort. Moreover...Klein, there's no way you would give yourself this headache just for the money, right? So, you will use it as a reason to do this just like me, right?"

In response to my question, Klein snorted, answering while holding the sheath on the floor:

"I'm not the same as a dreamer like you. It's just that...before, I also had a friend who was eliminated. If I don't do everything that I can for him, then I won't be able to sleep at night..."

Facing the Klein who had stood up, I gave a slight smile.

"So it's the same."

"It's not the same. Our main objective is still the treasure, with what we just talked about on the side.....with only that group of people, it would be bad if a giant ant comes out. I'll go and check out the situation."

"Ah, ah."

Slightly nodding my head, I closed my eyes and leaned deeply against the trunk of the tree. The whispered words of the katana-user floated over to me.

"And I worry about you. It's not just to gather intelligence, you moron. If you die by being brave in this kind of place, I certainly won't use the resurrection item on you!"

## Part 2

"Thank you for your concern. Then we will respectfully accept it. Please protect us until we reach the exit."

This was the first sentence the leader of «Black Cats of the Full Moon» guild, Keita spoke to me.

Five months had passed since the spring season's dusk when the death game called SAO began. In order to collect material for weapons, I had ventured into the labyrinth ten levels below the current front line.

As a Beater, I had rushed headlong since the beginning, utilizing my experience as a beta tester. Adopting a tough solo player approach, had enabled me to earn experience points very efficiently. It reached a point where I could even defeat monsters on the front line solo. As such, hunting at the current level was so easy and relaxing that it became a boring task. By avoiding other players, I was able to obtain the complete set of required amount of materials in two hours. As I was preparing to move toward the direction of the exit, I encountered a party retreating, a huge group of monsters pursuing them.

As a solo player, I immediately had the opinion that the party was totally unbalanced. Within the five player party, the only player who could assume a forward role is a guy carrying a mace and shield. The others were just a thief equipped with a dagger, a staff user carrying a two handed-staff and two long spear users. However when the mace user's hit points were reduced drastically, there was no one else who could substitute in. As a result, this type of party could only retreat slowly.

To determine the status of everyone, I checked their hit points. Apparently, it was more than sufficient for them to retreat safely to the exit. However, that would no longer apply if they encountered another group of monsters in the midst of retreating. After some slight hesitation, I dashed out from the path I was hidden in and spoke to the staff user who seemed to be the leader.

"Do you want me to assist with forward support?"

The staff user stared at me with his eyes wide open and nodded his head after a moment of hesitation.

"Then, sorry for troubling you, but please retreat immediately if there is any danger."

I nodded my head in acknowledgement and pulled a sword off of my back before shouting from behind the mace user to switch in. Thus, I rushed into the monsters' assault.

The enemies were a group of goblins which I had defeated in numbers just a while back when hunting alone. These monsters could be quickly defeated if I went all out with my sword skills. Even if I was unable to defend against any of the attacks, I would be able to last for a long time by depending on my «battle healing» skill to recover my hit points. However, I was instantly concerned. Though I do not fear the goblins, I was deeply concerned with the thoughts of those players behind me.

In general, high-level players causing a big disturbance while training in the lower levels was considered bad manners. If it persisted for a period of time, the player would receive a harsh reprimand when a request was made to a guild in the higher levels to resolve it. The player would end up being reported in the newspaper's list of players with bad etiquette and were subjected to a number of punishments. Though that should not be an issue as I considered it an emergency situation, it made me concerned. If not handled properly, they would have labelled me as a Beater instead of showing gratitude.

As such, I intentionally prolonged the time required to defeat the group of goblins by limiting the usage of my sword skills. At that time, I was still unaware that this decision of mine would lead to an irreparable mistake.

The whole group of goblins was finally defeated after several rounds of rotation with the mace user, who had been constantly replenishing his hit points with medicine. I was startled when this unknown party of five players started to cheer loudly. They were mutually giving each other a high-five rejoicing in the victory.

Though feeling at a loss, I still put on an unaccustomed smile while shaking everybody's hands. The only female player in the party, a black haired spear user held my hand last with both her hands while repeatedly saying to me through her tears:

"Thank you..... Thank you so much. I was really afraid..... when you came to our rescue, I was really happy. I truly appreciate your help."

Hearing such words while seeing the flowing tears, there was this indescribable emotion flowing through my chest. I remembered at that

moment when I helped them, it felt very good that I was strong enough to be able to do so.

Although I had been a solo player since the game began, this was not my first time helping other parties on the front line. However in a strategic party, it is a tacit understanding that we were supposed to help each other on the battlefield. Since there would be a day when I would need help in return, I would help others without expecting anything in return. Further, those being helped would only give a brief greetings in return. This was the best way to quickly handle the post-battle silence before the start of the next battle. That simple rational exists as a way to continuously and efficiently strengthen oneself.

However, they – the «Black Cats of the Full Moon» were different. The whole party was overcome with great joy just from a round of victory in battle, and were complementing each other's efforts. It seemed like the victorious trumpet sound part at the end of a stand-alone RPG game when I proposed to accompany them to the exit. That was probably influenced by the family-like atmosphere they had among themselves. To describe it further, I felt that it was in fact they who were finishing this mad game called SAO.

"I am also a little concerned about the remaining amount of recovery medicine I have..... If you don't mind, let's head toward the exit together."

Keita nodded while expressing a huge laughter toward my lies.

"Thank you so much for your concern."

No, when I finally started to realize that it was just me who had felt that it was a refreshing experience, it had been six months after the disappearance of «Black Cats of the Full Moon». As someone who had adopted the policy of being a solo player to accumulate strength, protecting someone much weaker than myself gave off a pleasant feeling similar to being depended upon. That is just how it was.

While in the main passage area after leaving the labyrinth, I had agreed to Keita's invitation to an ale house, their treat. As such, we were toasting in celebration with red wine they would consider expensive. When my self-introduction ended, Keita hesitantly asked about my current level in a whisper after the mood had calmed down.

I had more or less predicted this question would be asked. As such, I had thought of an appropriate fake number a while back. The number I told

them was in fact about three levels higher than their average level..... but, it was actually twenty levels lower than my true level.

"Huh! You can solo at this place with your current level?"

My sour expression when I replied to Keita surprised him.

"There is no need to speak in such a manner..... even if being solo, but basically I only select isolated enemies to attack while avoiding detection. However in terms of efficiency, it is not very high."

"Oh..... Indeed, then..... Although this is rather sudden..... But I think some guilds will invite you to join them very soon..... If you are willing, would you like to join our guild?"

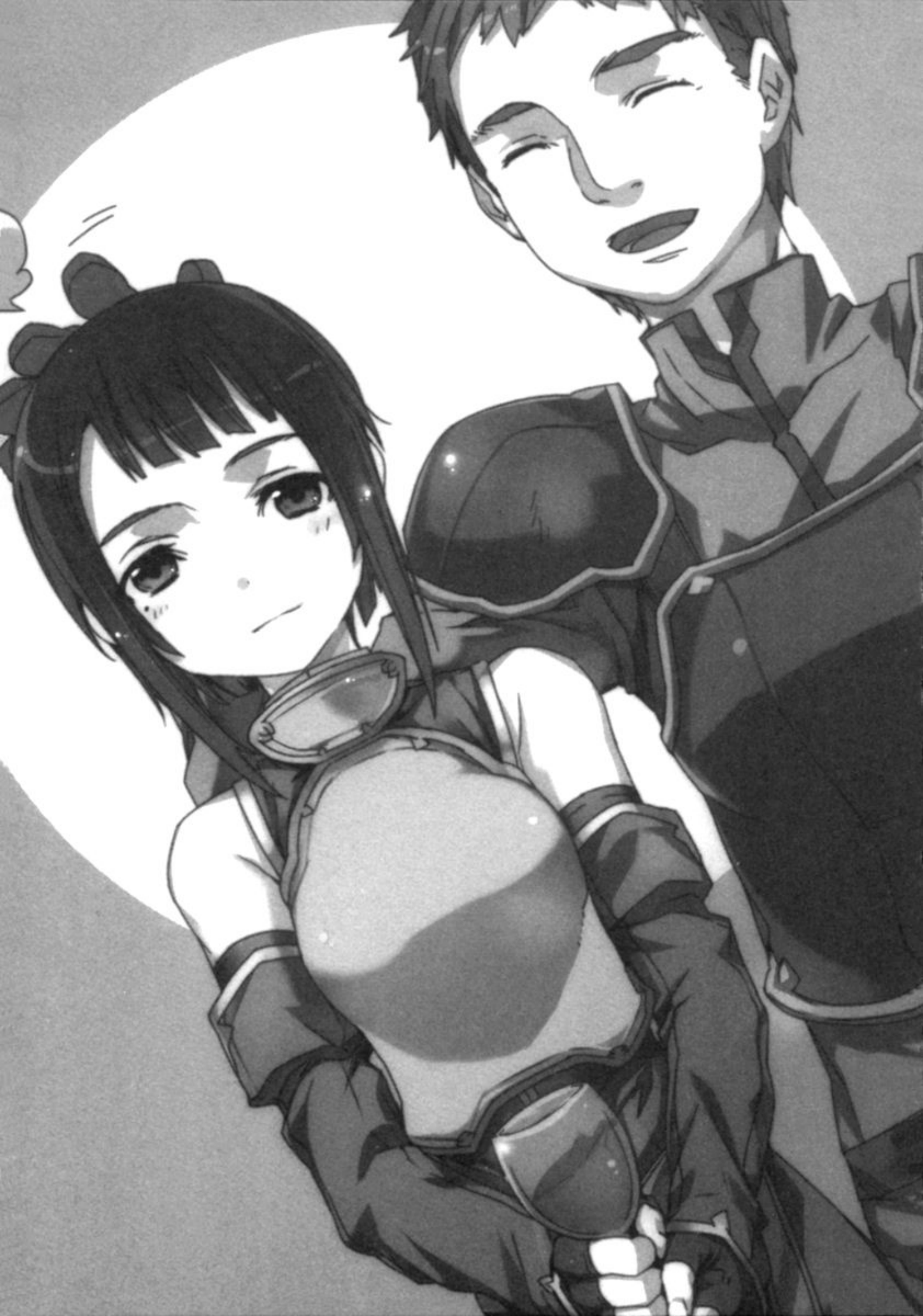
"Huh.....?"

Facing me, who was unsure how to respond, Keita's face, which was totally red, got more excited as he spoke.

"Look, based on our current level, we can safely train in the labyrinth we were previously in. As for the skills to move higher..... you would be well aware of our current circumstances. The only person who can assume the position of a forward is Tetsuo. No matter what, his recovery was unable to match the rate of deterioration. As such, the battle conditions will only get worse. If we have another companion to join us, things would have been much easier. Further..... Sachi, come here for a moment."

Keita raised his hand and called aloud to the black haired spear user. The petite girl called Sachi came over while holding a glass of red wine and shyly nodded at me. Keita placed his hand on Sachi's head before continuing and said:

"This girl's primary skill as you can see, is using a two-handed long spear. But her skill is relatively low compared our other long spear user. Therefore, I would like to take this opportunity to convert her to a shield and sword user. It's just that we never had the opportunity to practice before this. Furthermore, we are also not familiar with one-handed swords. If you are willing, will you be her coach?"



"What's this! Treating me like a little kid!"

Sachi raised her cheek and stuck out her tongue slightly while smiling and said:

"This is because I have always been responsible for attacking the enemies from a distance. If you suddenly needed me to move forward and engage the enemy in close quarter combat, I would be afraid."

"It will be fine as long as you take cover behind the shield. How many times do I need to repeat myself before you will understand..... seriously. You have been too easily frightened since long ago."

I was only aware of the front lines of SAO where there were full of killings. No, in my opinion all players competed for resources in a MMORPG. As such, their interactions were both interesting and fascinating. When Keita noticed I was looking at him, he shyly smiled and said:

"Ah..... Our guild members are actually computer research club members from the same high school in the real world. In fact, she lives very close to me..... Ah, please don't be concerned since everyone here is very nice. You will definitely be able to get close with the others very quickly."

Everyone in that group, Keita included, were decent people. That was something I already knew since I spent the return journey from the labyrinth with them. I felt guilty for deceiving that group of people when I forced a smile and nodded.

"Then..... Please allow me to join you all. Also, please offer me your guidance."

With a second forward, the Black Cats' Party Balance improved drastically.

No, if any of them were showing any doubt, they would find that my HP wouldn't drop for some strange reason. However, these kind friends all believed me because of what I said, that I made this coat from some rare materials—and this wasn't a lie—and they never doubted me.

During a party battle, I was only in charge of defense, and to let the members behind me deal with the enemies and gain experience points. Keita and the rest quickly leveled up, and after I joined in for a week, we were training at a main hunting ground that was a level higher.

We sat around in a safe zone within the dungeon. Keita was eating a bento Sachi made as he excitedly told me his dream,

"Of course, our allies' safety is of the most importance. But...if, if we only wanted safety, we just needed to lock ourselves in the city right from the beginning. Since we're training and increasing our levels like this, we hope to at least be on the clearing group. Even though the front lines are far away from us, we can only leave it to elite guilds like the Knights of the Blood or the Divine Dragons Alliance to conquer them...eh, Kirito, what's the difference between them and us?"

"Eh...un, information. Those guys have information on which areas were the most effective in training, how to get the strongest weapons in the game and so on."

That's the reason why I was in the attack squad, but Keita didn't seem to be happy about this answer.

"This...is obviously a reason. But I feel that it was willpower. Their desire to protect their friends, all the players are strong. It's because of this power that they were able to win in dangerous boss battles. We're the ones being protected, but our feelings won't lose to them. So...I feel that if we continue to work hard like this, we can catch up."

"Really...you're right."

Though I said that, I felt that it wasn't some amazing reason like that. The reason why the clearing groups had their motivation was that they always had a top swordsman who stood above thousands of players. The proof was that if they aimed to clear SAO just to protect players, those elite players should have provided all the information and equipment they got to the mid-level players. Then they could have improved every player's level, and the number of people who joined the clearing groups would increase.

The reason why they did that was because they hoped to be the strongest. Of course, I was the same as well. At that time, I would sneak out of our rest place and go to the front lines to continue leveling myself up. This act continued to pull my difference in level from the members of the Black Cats. Even though I knew the outcome, I continued to betray them.

But at that moment, I more or less believed that if the level of the Black Cats increased, we would be able to fight in the front lines. At that point, I thought that Keita's ideals may change the closed nature of the clearing groups.

In fact, the Black Cats were improving at what could be said to be an abnormally fast rate. The training area which we were using was a place I used to clear as part of the front lines. I knew all about that place, whether it was the danger spots or the effective spots. I continued to guide them like it was nothing, continued to come up with the most efficient plans, causing the average level of the Black Cats guild to greatly surpass that of the mainstream players. When I joined, we were still ten levels away from the front line, but this gap quickly became five. We continued to gain momentum and col, and it was even likely that we would soon have enough to buy a guild home.

However, there was one problem. Sachi's shield swordsman's transformation couldn't continue on.

But that couldn't be helped. When facing against savage monsters at close distance, what's more important than the value in levels was the courage to endure the fear and fight on until the end. Soon after SAO started, many players died because they panicked and sank into chaos. If I had to really say it, Sachi was really a quiet coward who didn't look like she could take the role of a forward.

I felt that there was no need for Sachi to change types because I had the status that far exceeded that required to be a shield. However, the other members didn't feel that way. Or rather, they seemed to be rather apologetic that I had to be the one being the forward, which would be extremely taxing. Even though she didn't say it because the morale within the group was good, Sachi felt that the pressure was becoming greater.

Then one night, Sachi suddenly disappeared from the rest place.

Everyone thought that the reason why they couldn't identify her location from the guild member list was because she was alone in a dungeon. This made the members under Keita panic, and they immediately went out to look.

However, I was the only one to insist on searching outside the dungeon. The apparent reason was that there were several spots that couldn't be tracked down. But in fact, I already had the high-level skill 'Trace' that could allow me to search for opposing enemies. Of course, I couldn't explain this to my allies.

As Keita and the rest ran to the dungeon in that level, I went to Sachi's room, activated the trace function, and followed the light green footsteps that appeared.

The small footprints went in a way everyone, including me, didn't expect at all. She disappeared at a drain that was somewhat far from the main street. I tilted my head and walked in, and saw that in a corner in the darkness where the water droplets could be here, Sachi was squatting down with a mantle that she just got, one with an invisibility function.

"...Sachi."

Once I said that, she shook her shoulder length black hair and looked up, muttering in surprise,

"Kirito...how did you know that I was here?"

I hesitated about how to answer it, and finally said.

"Instinct."

"...I see."

Sachi smiled and again put her face into the knees she was hugging. I tried my best to think of words, and said something that lacked creativity,

"...Everyone's worried about you. They even sent people to the dungeon to look for you. Hurry up and go back."

This time, it became a long silence. After a minute or two, I wanted to say the same thing again, but this time, Sachi's weak voice came while she lowered her head,

"Hey, Kirito, let's run away."

I asked instinctively,

"Run away...from where?"

"From this town, everyone at the Black Cats, monsters...from SAO."

I wasn't so familiar with girls—or even humans such that I could answer this immediately. After thinking about it for a long time, I timidly asked,

"Do you...have an intention of committing suicide together?"

After a short silence, Sachi smiled.

"Fufu...yeah, that should be okay...no, sorry. I lied. If I had the courage to commit suicide, I wouldn't have hid inside the town...don't stand around. Sit down too."

I didn't know what to do, so I sat down slightly beside Sachi on the stone floor. From the semi-circle exit of the drain, I could see the town lights that were as small as the stars.

"...I'm scared of death. Because I'm scared, I practically couldn't sleep during this time."

Finally, Sachi muttered.

"Why did such a thing happen? Why couldn't we leave the game? Why is it that we could die even if it is only a game? What could that Kayaba get by doing this? What's the meaning in this..."

Actually, I could make an answer to each of the five questions. But even I knew that Sachi wasn't looking for that sort of answer. I tried my best to think and said,

"Most likely, there's no meaning...and nobody could benefit from it. The moment the world became like this, everyone lost the most precious thing to them."

I endured my tears as I told a huge lie to the girl. That's because I lied to myself to get stronger, and felt the satisfaction of this secret when I entered the Black Cats gang. In that sense, I obviously got my benefit.

At that time, I should have told everything to Sachi. If I had even a teeny-weeny bit of sincerity, I should have revealed my ugly ego out. In that case, Sachi may have some stress taken from her, and she may even feel somewhat relaxed.

However, what I could only say was a lie to steel myself more.

"...You won't die."

"Why do you say that?"

"...Even in our current state, the Black Cats are still a strong guild. We have achieved a safe margin too. If you stay in that guild, you can continue to live on safely. Also, you don't really need to change into a swordsman."

Sachi lifted her head and showed me a reliant expression. However, I couldn't look straight into those eyes and lowered my head.

"...Really? I can live on until the end? Back to reality?"

"Ahh...you won't die. You'll live until the day when the game is cleared."

Those were words that weren't convincing and had no weight in them. Even so, Sachi leaned over to me, brought her face over to my left shoulder and cried for a while.

After a while, I sent a message to Keita and company and brought Sachi back to our hotel. Sachi went back to her room to rest, and I waited at the first level at the bar for Keita and the rest to return. I told them a few things—Sachi needed a much longer time to become a swordsman, and if possible, she should continue to be a lancer. Also, I could continue to be the forward.

Keita and the rest were wondering what happened between Sachi and me, but they happily agreed to my proposal. I heaved a sigh of relief, but this wouldn't settle the real problem.

From the next night on, Sachi would come over to sleep in my room. She said that if she continued to be with me and hear that she wouldn't die, she would be able to sleep peacefully. Now I definitely couldn't sneak out at night to earn experience. Even so, it didn't mean that my guilt of lying to Sachi and the rest disappeared.

For some reason, that memory was as compressed as a snowball, so I couldn't remember much. One thing I was certain of though was that Sachi and I didn't have a romantic relationship. We never slept in the same bed together, never cuddled with each other, talk about love or even look at each other.

Our relationship was more likely stray cats that were licking each other's wounds. Sachi would forget about her fear a bit because of my words, and I would rely on her to forget the guilt that I was a beater.

That's right—It was because I neglected Sachi's troubles that I found out this element of the SAO incident for the first time. Before that, I probably never felt the real terror of this SAO that had evolved into a death game. I systematically beat the low-leveled monsters I beat during the beta test, continued to level up and maintained in this safety margin. I wasn't the

Paladin Heathcliff, but in my memory, my life had never dropped into the danger zone.

I relied on the vast resources I got easily. Once I knew—that there were many players who were scared of death like this, I finally found a way to remove my guilt. Of course, that method was to continue protecting Sachi and the Black Cats.

For my own satisfaction, I forgot that I hid my level before entering the guild, forgot the memory that I ended up being the one protecting them, grooming them to be a top-notch guild. Every night, I would be at the bedside, comforting Sachi who was curled up in anxiety, saying to her 'you won't die, you won't die, you'll live on' like a mantra. Every time I say that, Sachi will show a smile somewhat under the blanket, stare at me and enter a light sleep.

However, Sachi still died in the end.

Less than a month after that night in the drain, she was hacked to death by a monster in front of me, and her body and soul were all scattered.

That day, Keita wanted to buy a little house as our guild home, brought the sum of money we finally gained and went to meet with the players who dealt with property. Sachi, I and the other three members were laughing as we were looking at the guild member common items column which had no items as we waited for Keita to return back. But after a while, the mace-user Tetsuo said,

"Let's head to the dungeon before Keita comes back, arrange the function and scare that guy."

The five of us entered the dungeon which we never went to before, the one which was just below the 3 levels the frontlines were at. Of course, I fought in that place before, and I knew that it was a place that was easy to earn money but had lots of traps. However, I didn't tell them that.

In the dungeon, the levels were within the safe area, so our hunting was proceeding smoothly. After an hour, we earned the targeted amount of money, and just when everyone was ready to head back and buy things, the member who was the thief discovered a treasure chest.

At that time, I was vocal about ignoring it. But once I was asked the reason, I couldn't say that the trap difficulty was up a level from this level on, and I could only stutter and emphasize that it looked dangerous.

The alarm trap sounded loudly, and the monsters swarmed into the room like a tidal wave. Immediately recognizing that the situation was dangerous, I immediately called for everyone to use the emergency escape crystal to get away. However, that place was designated as a place where the crystal would be ineffective—at that time, everyone, including me, ended up in either light or heavy panic.

The first one to die was the thief who activated the alarm. Then, it was mace-user Tetsuo, and the male lancer died behind him.

Panicking, I continued to swing the high-level sword skills I hid and killed waves after waves of monsters. But there were too many, and I didn't have a chance to destroy the treasure chest that continued to ring.

As Sachi's HP disappeared completely after being surrounded by the monster mob, she reached her right hand out to me as if she wanted to say something. Those widened eyes still showed the glow that she trusted me, just like every single night, until it was all heartbreaking.

I couldn't remember how I survived. As I recovered, the mob of monsters and the 4 allies of mine weren't in that room. But even in that situation, my HP bar dropped to about half.

Unable to think, I blankly returned back to the hotel.

Keita, who placed the brand new guild home key on the table and was waiting for us to come back, listened to me—how the 4 of them died, how I survived, and stared at me without expression. He said something like how beaters like me didn't have a right to join them.

He ran out of the town in Aincrad, and then jumped over the fence without hesitation as I followed him from behind, into the endless void.

What Keita said was the truth. It couldn't be debated. It was my arrogance that killed 4 members of the Black Cats of the Full Moon—no, 5. If they never met me, they would have continued to remain in the safe middle zone, and they wouldn't trigger what was a trap.

To survive in SAO, what we needed wasn't reflexes or numerical value in levels, but ample information. I increased their levels with high efficiency

but didn't tell them information. That was a tragedy I caused with my own two hands, and I personally killed Sachi who I swore to protect.

Whether she wanted to curse viciously at her final moment, I had to endure it. The reason why I continued to look for that rumored revival item was just to listen to those words.

### Part 3

During the four days remaining until Christmas, my level went up once more, to 70.

During this time, I did not sleep at all. This would be the price. Sometimes I get these piercing headaches, as if I was being struck by nails, but I think that even if I were to lie down, I wouldn't be able to fall asleep.

Since that encounter, Klein's guild *Fuurinkazan* had never been to the ant's valley again. I continued to mix in line with the other guilds, hunting the mechanical ants alone. The expressions of those players who saw my eyes had also finally turned from ridicule to disgust. Although sometimes there are still players that respond to me, as soon as anyone met with my line of sight, the face would immediately turn away from me.

Among the group of players whose target was the Christmas gift, the biggest question was where exactly was the giant fir tree that «Nicholas the Renegade» would appear under—regarding this question, I took advantage of the wait time in the ant valley, and obtained a very likely answer.

I had gone to the coordinates that I bought from various intelligence businesses, but even though the exteriors appeared to be Christmas trees, they were in fact not fir trees, but pine trees. The needles on pine trees are not the same. The front end of fir leaves has a thin and elongated oval shape. Because in the real world I have these two types of trees in my back yard, I know this.

A few months ago, I was on the thirty-fifth floor's training area where there was a random transfer dungeon called the "Lost Forest", and in a particular corner I found a giant curved tree. I thought that there had to be some hidden meaning to the shape, possibly the starting point of some unknown task and so carefully investigated, but nothing was found. In retrospect, that giant tree was a fir tree. On Christmas – that is, tonight, special Mob «Nicholas the Renegade» should appear there under the tree.

I listened to the calling sound that indicated I was now up a level to 70 without any feeling, and after the ant mob around me was dealt with, I took out from my bag a teleport crystal. Without greeting the players currently in line, I went straight to the frontline floor where I was lodging, to the main street area of the forty-ninth floor.

I raised my head to look at the transfer gate plaza's clock tower, to see that it was three hours away from midnight. Probably because they wanted to spend Christmas Eve together, around the square was full of players in couples. I quickly crossed them to go back to the hotel.

Charging into my hotel room, I immediately opened the storage box installed in the room, taking from the item window that popped up all the restoration, detoxification crystals and potions and the like. Although these alone could count up a hefty balance sheet, I would not pity it even if all of them were used up.

As soon as I took out a single-handed sword from my collection, confirmed its durability, I took off the sword on my back that I used to fight the ants and exchanged it. Then I also exchanged my leather coat and armor and everything else for new items. When I had finished, I was about to close the window when I saw my inventory and stopped my hand.

There, in addition to the «Self» written there, my own inventory page, was another label that read the name «Sachi».

This is the result of a very good relationship between two players, but one which has not progressed to «Marriage» —such players set their own common items window. This is different from the way that all items in marriage are shared in that only items in this separate window are shared.

Sachi, who had never asked for a confession or to hold hands previously, requested shortly before her death to set up this window. When I asked for the reason, she gave an answer that was difficult to accept, that it was for easily exchanging healing potions and similar items—if this was the purpose, there was clearly already a guild open that could be used for that. But I nonetheless agreed, and set up this window to share only between Sachi and me.

Though Sachi died, this window still remained. Of course, the friend list would also still retain Sachi's name, but it would be a grey that could not be contacted. And the few remaining healing potions left in the shared inventory, these would also not be used. After half a year, even with the guild page deleted without feeling, I was unable to remove the label of Sachi's name. Of course—the reason was not that I believed she could be resurrected—I just couldn't forgive the self that would have been able to feel better after having deleted her name.

I only recovered and closed the window after looking at Sachi's name for ten minutes. It was two hours until midnight.

As I walked out of the room and towards the direction of the transfer gate, I kept thinking about that expression on Sachi's face in her final moment, what she was thinking, and, what exactly she wanted to say.

Transferring to the gate on the thirty-fifth floor, I came to a completely different square from that of the frontline, one that was very quiet. Maybe because there was still some distance from here to the main battlefield of intermediate players, the main street area was simply not worth strolling through. But still, I pulled up my coat's collar to avoid the eyes of several players in the area, quickly leaving the street.

Unwilling to spend time fighting against the small fries, I started running after checking that no one was chasing after me from behind. With the level I managed to gain during the past one month, my agility went up a lot, and my feet that stepped on the snow were as light as feathers. The aching pain that came from the temple never disappeared, but it caused my mind to be unable to sleep at all.

After about 10 minutes of running, I arrived at the entrance of the forest maze. This field dungeon was segregated by numerous 4-sided polygons, and as the areas were connected to each other, it could be said to be impossible to break through if there's no map.

After opening the map, I stared at the marked areas and went into. After memorizing the path in my mind, I went alone into that silent forest.

After two battles that I couldn't avoid, I entered the area in front of all the trees that covered the target without any difficulty. There was still more than 30 minutes.

Then, I would be fighting against this boss monster alone that would likely take my life—a high chance at that. I couldn't feel any fear inside. Or rather, maybe that's what I was expecting. To die in battle to revive Sachi may be the only way I could accept death—

I didn't want to say something heroic like I'm looking for my resting place. I caused Sachi and the other four allies to die meaninglessly, and I have no right to look for a significance in dying.

What's the point of doing this? Sachi once asked me. And I answered her, there was none.

Right now, I could finally turn those words into reality. Sachi died meaninglessly in this meaningless death game SAO that the insane genius Kayaba Akihito created. With that, I'll die in a place no one would notice, not remembered by anyone, and to die meaninglessly like that.

If, I beat that boss and survive, that revival item would turn from rumor to reality. That was what I thought. Sachi's soul would return from the Death Road or the River Styx, and then I can finally hear her last words. Finally—just finally, let me wait for this moment...

Just when I was ready to step forward and finish walking the last few meters, several players appeared from the warp point behind me. I jumped back in shock as I held the hilt of my sword behind me.

What appeared was a group of 10 people, and standing right in front was a samurai guy in light armor, a katana on his waist, and a headscarf—Klein.

The main members of the Fuurinkazan guild each looked nervous as they moved closer to me from the warp point behind them. I continued to look at Klein's face and squeeze out a hoarse voice.

"...Were you following me?"

Klein grabbed the hair that was made straight by the bandana and nodded.

"Yeah. We have someone with good tracking skill."

"Why me?"

"Because I bought the information that you bought all the tree coordinates, and for safety measure, I went to look at the sentry gate at the 49th level, but found that you were moving towards the level where there was no information on. I felt that your battle ability and gaming instincts were really strong, stronger than the clearing group...even more than that Heathcliff. So...Kirito, you can't die at a place like this."

Klein reached out his right hand, pointed his finger at me and shouted,

"GIVE UP ON THAT RECKLESS SOLO ATTACK AND PARTY WITH US! LET THE PERSON WHO GETS THE REVIVAL ITEM DROP KEEP IT, OKAY!?"

"...In that case..."

I couldn't believe that Klein said that to me because he viewed me as a friend, that he was worried about me.

"In that case, it's meaningless...I have to attack alone..."

I wielded my sword hilt tightly, and my mind was burning crazily and somewhat unconsciously thought.

—Let's just kill everyone.

In the past, when the death game started, I abandoned Klein, this beginner who didn't know anything, and went on to the next town. I regretted over this for a long time, and was relieved that Klein was able to live on in such a fine fashion.

At that time, I was seriously wondering, do I have to achieve my aim even if I had to slay one of my few friends and fall as a red player? My heart was weakly screaming that this was meaningless. However, the other side was giving a voice, hoping that I would die meaninglessly, but was roared back in an overwhelming fashion.

I really believed that if I drew my sword slightly then, I wouldn't be able to stop myself from that moment on. And Klein was looking at me sadly while my right hand trembled and continued to struggle.

At that moment, a 3rd group of intruders arrived.

Also, this group wasn't just 10, but about 3 times the party. I stared at that large party blankly and muttered to Klein, who turned back in a similarly shocked manner,

"Seemed like you guys were followed too, Klein."

"...Ahh, looks that way..."

At the boundary that looked like it was 50m away, there were people I recently saw at the anthill, staring wordlessly at Fuurinkazan and me. The Fuurinkazan swordsman that was standing beside Klein leaned beside the leader's face and whispered,

"Those guys are the «Sacred Dragon Alliance», a group of guys who can become orange just to attack the flag boss."

I heard that name often too. Their name was as famous as the Knights of the Blood, the largest guild amongst the clearing group. Those guys should each be below me in level, but I had no belief in beating that many people.

But—perhaps the outcome should be the same.

Suddenly, I felt that whether I was killed by a boss monster or a guild, it would all be meaningless. But then again, at least it would be a better choice than fighting with Klein, right?

I decided to draw my sword from my back. I was lazy to even think. I just needed to be like a robot and focus on swinging my sword, destroy everything in front of me until I break down.

However, Klein's shout caused my hand to stop.

"DAMN IT! THOSE BASTARDS!"

The katana user drew out the weapon at his waist faster than I could and growled at me from behind.

"Get over there, Kirito! Leave this to me! Go beat the boss! I won't allow you to die though! I won't forgive you if you dare to die in front of me! Never!"

"..."

There wasn't much time left. I turned my back on Klein and entered the last warp point without saying thanks.

The large fir trees, the location where I memorized, and the curves of the memories, they were all standing there silently. There didn't seem to be any other 4-sided areas of trees as the landscape was glowing with pure white snow, and it looked like a barren land with all life extinguished.

As the timer in the corner of my eye reached zero, an alarm sounded from somewhere, and I lifted my head and looked over at the treetop.

The pitch-black night sky, or rather, with the base of the upper level as background, those lines of light continued to reach over. Looking at them closely, I found that it was a strangely-shaped monster dragging a giant sled.

As it reached the top of the trees, a black shadow flew down from the sled, and I took a few steps back.

What landed hard and scattered the snow was a monster that was 3 times my size. He still appeared to be human, but his arms were extremely long, and because his body was bent forward, those arms almost touched the ground. The small red eyes were glowing under the abnormal bulge on the forehead of the shadow. The lower half of the face was full of curly grey beard, and the length even reached the waist.

Strangely, this monster was wearing a red and white shirt, a cone-shaped hat that was of the same color, wielding an axe with the right hand, and a large bag full of things on the left hand. The designer who designed this guy probably wanted to let a large group of players to be scared yet amused once they see this ridiculous ugly version of a boss Santa Claus. But to me, who's facing this «Nicholas the Renegade» solo, the appearance of the boss wasn't important.

Nicholas may be starting to say the lines for this mission as he got ready to move his tangled beard.

"Shut up!"

As I muttered this, I drew my sword, and my right foot kicked hard into the thick layer of snow.

## Part 4

It has been more than a year since I started playing SAO, but this was the first time my HP bar had entered the red zone.

After the defeated target's polygon shattered, it left only a sack behind. There wasn't a single restoration crystal left in my inventory, I had never come this close to death before. Even though I survived, there was no happiness or comfort in my heart. Instead, I felt an emotion closer to disappointment. Why did I survive?

As I returned my sword back to its scabbard, the sack glowed and then disappeared. All the items that were dropped by the target should have registered in my inventory. Taking a deep breathe, I raised my trembling hand and called up the inventory window.

The inventory window has many tabs with names that would irritate most players. Weapons & Armor, Jewels/Ores, Crystals, and even Food Ingredients, I scrolled through the window filled with item tabs to find a single item.

A few seconds later, the item that I was searching for entered my line of sight.

It was called «Divine Stone of Returning Soul».

My heart started to beat frantically, it felt as though blood had just started flowing through the part of the heart that was numbed for the past several days- several months.

Ca.... Can I revive Sachi? If this can be done, wouldn't it mean that, Keita, Tetsuo, and the souls of every player who lost their life in SAO since the beginning haven't been destroyed...?

This may be my only chance to see Sachi again. Just thinking of that made my heart skip a beat. No matter what curses or swears that might be thrown at me or any consequences that might befall because of my lies, this time I would hug her tightly with both my arms and look into the pair of black coloured eyes and say words from the bottom of my heart. It is not that you will never die, but it is me who is going protect you. To fulfil that promise, I will work hard to make myself stronger.

After several failed attempts to select the stone from the window due to my trembling hands, I finally managed to materialize the «Divine Stone of

Returning Soul». Floating above the inventory window is a rainbow-coloured jewel stone around the size of an egg with such beauty that was unable to be put into words.

"Sachi.....Sachi....."

Calling out her name, I tapped the jewel stone, then clicked on the help menu by the window, simple instructions appeared on the panel in a familiar font style.

[The item can be used on the player's shortcut menu or holding the materialized item and shouting «Revive .. Player Name», the effect will only work and revive the fallen player during the time frame between death of the player to the disappearance of item's effect light. (approximately 10 seconds)]

Approximately 10 seconds.

This phrase that seemed as if it was added intentionally, clearly and cruelly announcing that Sachi will never be revived.

Approximately 10 seconds. This is from the time when a player's HP falls to zero, and the body shattering into polygons, to Nerve Gear sending out electrical signals to fry the player's brain in the real world. I cannot help but imagine how Sachi must have felt during the short span of 10 seconds, from her body disappearing till her Nerve Gear frying its owner's brain. It must have been extremely painful for her. In this span of 10 seconds, what was she thinking? I cursed myself repeatedly.....

"Ugg..Ahhhhhh. Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh..."

I let out an animal-like scream.

Grabbing the Divine Stone of Returning Soul that was floating above the inventory tab, I threw it with all my might onto the snowy ground.

"Ahh... Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

I stamped on the crystal furiously with my shoe while screaming. However, the crystal continued to glow steadily without being affected from the stamping, there was not even a single scratch, much less a crack on it. I screamed with all my might, shoved both my hand into the ground and

using my fingers I grabbed the accumulated snow, in the end I continue my screaming while rolling on the snow.

It is meaningless, everything is meaningless. It does not matter if Sachi died while being scared and in pain, or me challenging the Christmas special target, NO, living in this world or the fact that 10,000 players are trapped in here totally has no meaning. I finally understood it now, this is the only truth.

I did not know how long I kept this up, no matter how I scream, how I shout, I did not feel any urge to cry. Is it because this factitious body of mine lacks that function? Finally, wearily I stood up, picked up the holy crystal that was buried in the snow and headed towards the portal that led to the previous area of the dungeon.

There was only Klein and the members of «Fuurinkazan» remaining in the forest. The members of «Divine Dragons Alliance» were nowhere to be seen. As I walk toward the katana-wielder who was sitting on the ground, I checked to see that there was no loss in numbers.

It's obvious that Klein was the only one who was tired, but not as much as I did. I could guess that he negotiated with the Divine Dragons Alliance and fought a duel. However, my heart wasn't feeling grateful.

The katana user saw me walk over, and his expression showed ease. However, his lips stiffened after seeing my expression.

".....Kirito....."

I dropped the holy crystal on the knee of Klein who was calling my name in a low and coarse voice.

"This is the revival item, but it cannot be used on people who have died long ago. Take it and save the next person who dies in front of you."

As I was preparing to head toward the exit after saying that, Klein grabbed my coat.

"Kirito... Kirito....."

It shocked me to look at him with tears flowing down his fully-beard cheeks.

"Kirito... You... You must survive.... Even if all the others perish... You must survive till the end....."

I pulled the sleeve of my coat from Klein's hands, who cried on as he repeated for me to continue living on.

"Good-Bye."

After saying that, I made my way out from the forest in a lost manner.

By the time I was aware of my surroundings, I was back in the room of the inn at the 49th storey without any recollection of how I made my way back.

The time was around 3am.

I started thinking what I should do from this point onwards. For the past month, the revival item was the motivation for me to continue surviving. Although it existed, it wasn't the item that I wanted.

After thinking for a while, I decided to head off and fight the boss of this level once dawn broke. If I beat that guy, I would continue on to beat the boss of the 50th level, and then, I'll continue on to the 51st.

I couldn't think of any other ending for a stupid clown. After making this decision, my feelings relaxed, and I just sat on the chair like that. Not seeing anything, not thinking about anything, but waiting for morning to arrive.

The moonlight that shone down through the window started changing positions bit by bit, and finally, it was replaced by a grey daybreak. I didn't know how many hours I did not sleep, but it felt good for a final morning after the worst night.

As the clock on the wall ticked to 7am, I got ready to get up from the chair, and a strange alarm rang in my ears.

Looking around, I couldn't find anything that could be the source of the sound. Finally, at the corner of my sights, I found a prompting purple signal from the main window flickering away, and I moved my fingers.

What glowed was the same item window Sachi and I shared. There was a limited use item. I scrolled the screen down in a puzzled manner, and found the timer activated message record crystal.

I took the crystal out, removed the window and placed it on the table.

After clicking on the glowing crystal, I heard that memorable voice of Sachi.

Kirito, Merry Christmas.

At the time when you hear this message, I am probably dead. That is because if I were still alive, I would have removed this crystal from the shared inventory on Christmas Eve and let you hear what I have to say personally.

That... Let me clarify why I have recorded this message.

I, probably, will not survive for long. Of course, this does not mean that I doubt the capability of Kirito and the «Black Cats of the Full Moon» guild. That is because Kirito is very strong and the rest of the members are getting stronger by the day.

How should I explain this..... A very close friend of mine from another guild lost her life. Being a timid person like me, she only hunted in safe areas, but because of her bad luck, she was killed by mobs on her way back to town. After that, I pondered over various stuffs and I came to a conclusion. To continue surviving in this world, it matters not how strong your companions are, if you do not have the will to live or the determination to survive no matter what, death definitely awaits.

For me.. Truthfully, ever since the first time I stepped into the beginner practice area, I was and have been very afraid. Actually, I never intended to leave the Starting City. Although I was very close to members from the Black Cats of the Full Moon in the real world and I enjoyed the time we spent together, I hated going into battles. I probably will die eventually if I continue to hold this attitude in battle. This was not caused by anyone, the problem lies with me.

Ever since that night, you've been telling me it's alright every night and that I won't die. That is why if by any chance I die, you'll definitely blame yourself for it and won't forgive yourself. This is also the reason why I thought of recording this message. I would like to tell Kirito, it isn't your fault. If there is any problem, it would be me. The date will be set on the next Christmas, because I would like to at least try to survive until then, hoping to walk down the snowy street together with you.

Actually.... I knew how strong Kirito is. One time, when I woke up from Kirito's bed, I accidentally saw your level from your opened status window behind you.

Even after thinking long and hard, I still did not manage to come up with any reasons why Kirito-kun would hide his real level and form a party with us. But I didn't mention this to the other members, as I believed that someday you would tell us the reason personally.... I was rejoicing when I found out that you are very strong. After knowing that, I started to be able to sleep peacefully as long as I am by your side. Perhaps to you, being with me might be of significance to you, this also made me very happy. If this is the case, there was definitely meaning in me coming to the higher floors even for a timid person like me.

That... Actually, what I am trying to say is, even if I die, you should strive to survive. Live on, look upon this world until it ends, please help me find out the reason why this world was created, the meaning of why such a timid person is in this world, the significance of our meeting. That is my wish.

Ah... Seems like there is still some time left. This crystal can record plenty of stuff. Hmmm, then, since Christmas is such a special occasion, I'll sing a Christmas carol. I do have some confidence in my voice. I guess I'll go with [Rudolph, the red-nosed reindeer]. Actually I would have preferred to sing other songs like [Winter Wonderland], [White Christmas] which are more well known, but unfortunately I can only sing the lyrics of this song.

Why did I only remember [Rudolph, the red-nosed reindeer]? The previous night, Kirito said something to me, "No matter who you are, you definitely can make a difference in someone's life." Telling me that even if it is me, there is a place where I belong. After hearing those words, I was extremely glad and I remembered this song. I don't know why but it was probably because I kind of thought of myself as Rudolph and you as Santa Claus.... if I have to put it in words, you give off a fatherly feeling. My father left me when I was still very young, that is why every night when I was sleeping beside you, I kept wondering if that was the feeling that a father would give. Ah, okay, I'll start singing.



.....To me, you'll always be like a bright star that shines and guides me from the opposite end of a dark alley. Good-bye, Kirito. It was really fortunate of me to have met you and to have been with you.

Thank you.

Good Bye.

(End)

## Author's Notes

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Long time no see; or perhaps it is more proper to call this the first meeting. I am Kawahara. Thank you very much for reading «Sword Art Online 2: Aincrad».

After volume one was published, I received a large amount of valuable advice regarding "How can I continue this from this sort of ending?" No matter how you look at it, the game was completely cleared, and the world had also collapsed. Even while I, myself, was reading it, I felt there were absolutely no elements that could be continued further.

Then, there was the sequel that hurt my brain, or namely, this book. My apologies, the time was turned back to the past. And moreover, it was a collection of short stories. I'm truly sorry about that.

I have previously also played some online games. But no matter in what game, I have never been part of a high-ranking group. I merely envied those eternally strong players with the best equipment and reputation, one after another easily defeating monsters, and afterwards feeling that they were "So skilled! So strong!" (haha)

Therefore, I wanted to write about not only the volume one's protagonists Kirito and Asuna and their «Game Clearer» type of top players, but wanted even more to write something about the stories of ordinary mid-level players; and this second volume's four short stories, have precisely this kind of content. Regardless of which story, they are basically about Kirito debuting and causing a big stir; and feeling that he is "So skilled! So strong!" like Silica and Lisbeth felt, is precisely what I have felt every year since becoming an MMO player. Really, and once would be enough, I really want to know what it feels like to show off to others a weapon of which there are only three copies in the entire server.

Besides that, there's one more thing that I must apologize to everyone about. Even though the four female characters in this book are all different female players, their male counterpart, as discussed earlier, was always Kirito-san. Even though there is no way for me to explain myself to everyone properly on this point, I painfully excuse myself, and ask that everyone please use the "even though the criminal and victim change every time, the detective is always the same person" mindset you have when reading detective novel series... you can't do it right? Sorry, sorry.

Lastly, to abec-sensei who drew all the constantly appearing new heroines with personality and cuteness, and to Miki-san who gave me many ideas with regards to all the strange and complex game system settings: you have taken care of me yet again.

And to you who read this book to the end, I am truly thankful.

May 26th 2009, Kawahara Reki

## References

1.   ↑   Originally this was translated as a 'lantern' but we thought that a camp stove fit the situation better. The thought of cooking on top of a lantern seemed kind of weird. Although, according to the chapter art, it is indeed a lantern. Maybe they were playing Minecraft.
2.   ↑   PuG is an acronym referring to pickup groups, a group of random people forming a party to tackle an instance or quest within an MMORPG.
3.   ↑   The Holly is a type of plant traditionally used to decorate Christmas wreaths. But this manner of calling December the "Month" of the Holly must be either very obscure or possibly made up, as I've never heard of this nor can I find it anywhere else.
4.   ↑   "Renegade" refers to how the monster is somebody who has abandoned his religion, whether for atheism or conversion to another. Obviously, the reference is to St. Nicholas A.K.A. Santa who gives out presents on his flying reindeer sled on Christmas Eve. But here, he's being portrayed as a monster rather than a saint, hence the "Renegade" portion of the name.

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